The Dissertation Committee for Chiyuma Elliott Certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

Blackness and Rural Modernity in the 1920s

Committee:

Shirley E. Thompson, Supervisor

Laurie Green

Steven D. Hoelscher

Meta D. Jones

Jeffrey L. Meikle

Blackness and Rural Modernity in the 1920s

by

Chiyuma Elliott, A.B.; M.A.

Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Texas at Austin

December 2011

Acknowledgements

First thanks are due to my thesis committee at the University of Texas: Shirley E. Thompson (my chair), Laurie Green, Steven Hoelscher, Meta DuEwa Jones, and Jeffrey Meikle. Their willingness to ask tough questions at every stage helped me navigate the complexities of interdisciplinary research and writing, and I am so grateful for their time and attention.

My thanks also go to my MFA faculty advisors, who had the foresight to see (even when I could not) how my doctoral work enriched my poetry: Karen Brennan, Heather McHugh, Debra Alberry, David Baker, and C. Dale Young.

Grants and fellowships from the Dean of Graduate Studies at the University of Texas, the Mellon Foundation, and the American Philosophical Society made much of my archival research possible, and also provided invaluable time to write.

My project is better because of the fine librarians and support staffs at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas, the New York State Archives, the Special Collections Reading Room at the Library of Congress, the Maryland State Archives, the Georgia State Newspaper Project, and the African American Museum and Library in Oakland, California.

The research talks at the Stanford Humanities Center, where I was on staff for five years, gave me a much broader range of reference, and some of my dearest friends: Christen Smith, Johannes Fabian, and Steven Justice (the love of my life). Arnold Rampersad likely has no idea how much I learned from him during his daily hot chocolate break when he was on sabbatical at SHC in 2002-03; he was and is a constant reminder of what I am striving for: scholarly rigor and enduring commitment to the field

of African American literary studies.

This thesis is immeasurably better for Shelley Fisher Fishkin's intellectual guidance and unflagging support. Thanks are also due to Martha Norkunas (whose "Cultural Representations of the Past" course launched this project); to A. Van Jordan (who introduced me to the work of Oscar Micheaux, and generously shared hard-to-find primary sources); to Cecilia Moore (who responded to my email query about the Cardinal Gibbons Institute with enthusiasm, practical advice, and photocopies of rare articles and archival materials); to Maura Nolan, Dan Blanton, Ann Middleton, Gene Rochlin, and Donald McQuade (for their welcome to Berkeley); and to Sepp Gumbrecht and Laura Selznick (for years of mentorship, friendship, and wonderful book recommendations).

Thanks to my family for believing in me. My husband, Steve, moved his desk and bookshelves into the living room so I would have "a room of my own" in which to write—both a practical help and a profound vote of confidence that meant the world to me.

Blackness and Rural Modernity in the 1920s

Chiyuma Elliott, Ph.D.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2011

Supervisor: Shirley E. Thompson

The New Negro Movement (often called the Harlem Renaissance) made black creative production visible to an extent unprecedented in American History. Complex representations of African Americans started to infiltrate a popular culture previously dominated by stereotypes; people from all walks of life were confronted for the first time with art made by African Americans that asked them to think in new ways about the meaning of race in America.

The term Harlem Renaissance conjures up images of urban America, but the creative energies of many New Negro figures were actually focused elsewhere—on rural America. Urbanite Jean Toomer spent time teaching in an agricultural college in the rural South, and wrote award-winning poetry and prose about that experience. Langston Hughes wrote blues lyrics about the struggles of rural migrants in New York that highlighted the complex interconnections of rural and urban experience. And the pioneer black filmmaker Oscar Micheaux incorporated numerous fictionalized accounts of his own experiences as a homesteader in South Dakota into his race movies and novels.

New Negro writers asserted that their art shaped how people understood themselves and were understood by others. Accordingly, this project examines both literary representations, and how literary works related to the real lives and struggles of rural African Americans. My research combines archival, literary, and biographical

materials to analyze the aesthetic choices of three New Negro authors (Hughes, Micheaux, and Toomer), and explain the interrelated literary and cultural contexts that shaped their depictions of African American rural life.

Houston Baker, in his influential 1987 book Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, defined black modernism as an awareness of radical uncertainty in human life. My central contention is that one of the most radical uncertainties in interwar-period America was the changing rural landscape. I revisit the largely-forgotten (though large-scale) social movement to fight rural outmigration by modernizing rural life. And I argue that, rather than accepting the simple binary that took the urban to be modern and the rural backward, African Americans in the 1920s created and experienced complicated formulations of the rural and its connections to modern blackness.

Table of Contents

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

I felt rather bewildered by so much excitement and metropolitanism where hardly two years before I had hauled one of the first loads of lumber on the ground to start the town. I could not help but feel that the world moved swiftly, and that I was living, not in a wilderness—as stated in some of the letters I had received from colored friends...—but in the midst of advancement and action.

—Oscar Micheaux, The Conquest, (1913): 138.

Introduction

The New Negro Movement made black creative production visible to an extent unprecedented in American History. Complex representations of African Americans started to infiltrate a popular culture previously dominated by stereotypes: of mammys, sambos, coons, dandies, and pickanninys. People from all walks of life were confronted for the first time with art made by African Americans that asked them to think in new ways about the meaning of race in America. These new images did not come about by chance. Instead, starting in 1900, Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, and other African American leaders made it a priority to promote images of African American life that were "unfettered by the racist burdens of the past." As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. noted, that New Negro project challenged:

> the vicious assault on negro freedom and political rights enacted in literature, in theater and on the vaudeville stage, and throughout the popular visual arts, in the form of a blanket of demeaning stereotypes of deracinated, ugly, trecherous, hauntingly evil Sambo images.[1]

The term "Harlem Renaissance" is now more commonly used to designate the flowering of African American creative work in the early decades of the twentieth-century, but it was under the banner of the New Negro movement that Alain Locke published the

---

1 Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "Harlem on Our Minds." Critical Inquiry 24.1 (Autumn 1997): 2. Gates's 1988 book The Signifying Monkey forged a link between literary criticism and African American vernacular traditions that proved essential in later scholarly interpretations of the Harlem Renaissance; Cary Wintz, Gloria Hull, Wilson Moses, and Tony Martin are among the many scholars who have affirmed both Gates's chronology of, and disctinction between, the Harlem Renaissance and the broader New Negro movement.

special issue of Survey Graphic magazine in March of 1925 that both ushered in the Harlem Renaissance and characterized the creative revolution as centered in New York: "Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro."[2] A cultural renaissance did take place in Harlem in the 1920s, and it was contemporaneous with a broader New Negro renaissance of images of African American life meant to bring about increased civil rights, and social and economic equality.

The term Harlem Renaissance conjures up images of urban America, but the creative energies of many New Negro figures were actually focused elsewhere—on rural America. The three artists in my study are no exception. Urbanite Jean Toomer spent two months teaching in an agricultural college in rural Georgia in 1921, made a brief follow-up visit South in 1922, and wrote award-winning poetry and prose about those experiences. Langston Hughes traveled through the rural South in the summer of 1927 (and also returned South in 1932).[3] He wrote blues lyrics about the struggles of rural migrants in New York that highlighted the complex interconnections of rural and urban

---

2 Davarian Baldwin's Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2007) is one of the most influential recent works on the New Negro period that focus critical attention on a city other than New York; his forthcoming edited collection of essays, Escape From New York! The 'Harlem Renaissance' Reconsidered (University of Minnesota Press), further develops this same theme.

3 Hughes discusses the 1932 speaking tour in his 1956 memoir I Wonder as I Wander (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993). Arnold Rampersad's The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume 1 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002) and Emily Bernard's Remember Me to Harlem (New York: Vintage Books, 2002) also document the trip, which was initially suggested and organized by Mary McCleod Bethune. On Fenruary 10, 1932, Hughes wrote to his friend Carl Can Vechten from the road: "I'm enclosing a list of 'mail-stops' so you can see which way the tour leads: through Mississippi in February, then Arkansas, Memphis, Possibly St. Louis, and up to the middle West. Back to Texas in April, and then more than likely California in the spring if sufficient bookings come in....This might amuse you: Of all the colleges I've visited, the only one that failed to pay me the fee agreed on was the white university, Chapel Hill." Bernard, 93.

experience. And the pioneer black filmmaker Oscar Micheaux incorporated numerous fictionalized accounts of his own experiences as a homesteader in South Dakota into his race movies and novels, and also regularly depicted rural life in the Jim Crow South. Sparta, Georgia and Spartanburg, South Carolina; Alabama, Mississippi, and New York; South Dakota and the deep South; all these places were bound up in the stories about rural modernity penned and filmed by these three New Negro artists. Rather than accepting the seemingly simple binary that dominates contemporary literary scholarship—that the urban was modern and the rural backward[4]—African Americans in the 1920s created and experienced far more complicated formulations of the rural and its connections to modern blackness. What I will show is that the three artists in my study profited materially from creating literary and visual approximations of black rural culture,

4 Following Alain Locke, who in 1925 claimed in his introductory essay to The New Negro anthology that "[i]n the very process of being transplanted" northward and city-ward, "the Negro is becoming transformed," (6) recent critics have both explicitly and implicity supported his claim about rural alterity. Nowhere is this more evident than in contemporary anthologies of period work, such as David Levering Lewis's The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader (New York: Penguin, 1995), which reiterates the focus on urban modernity of his influential 1981 work When Harlem Was In Vogue (New York: Knopf, 1981), and Venetria Patton and Maureen Honey's Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2001), which makes critical interventions with its focus on gender, inclusion of noncanonical selections by women, and incorporation of the neglected genres of music and the visual arts, yet leaves rural African Americans wholly outside thus more inclusive conceptualization of the New Negro movement. Seminal critical works such as Brent Hayes Edwards's The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003) have implicitly endorsed the assumption of a normative urban modernity by focusing exclusively on cosmopolitan cultural exchanges, and popular works such as Rebecca Carroll's edited collection of essays, Uncle Tom or New Negro? African Americans Reflect on Booker T. Washington and Up From Slavery 100 Years Later (New York: Broadway Books, 2006), which includes selections from academic and mainstream writers, make plain the fact that even the most prominent advocate for rural modernity and rural African Americans in the interwar period has a highly contested place within the New Negro canon.

and traded on and substantially revised conventional, stereotypical ideas about a backward rural folk living at a spatial and temporal remove from the fast pace of modern urban life.

The epigraph to my dissertation comes from Oscar Micheaux's 1913 novel The Conquest, and talks about both the subjective temporality of black rural experience, and the fact that rural modernity seemed so impossible to urban counterparts far-removed from the country. Micheaux's protagonist, Oscar Devereaux, describes rural South Dakota as follows:

> I felt rather bewildered by so much excitement and metropolitanism where hardly two years before I had hauled one of the first loads of lumber on the ground to start the town. I could not help but feel that the world moved swiftly, and that I was living, not in a wilderness—as stated in some of the letters I had received from colored friends...—but in the midst of advancement and action.

In the dissertation, I argue that black rural modernity was not just a literary invention. It was also a material reality (or at the very least a material possibility) for many of the black majority who lived in rural America during the 1920s. I argue that these people were right to see themselves as key participants in a cultural renasisance that would reshape African American life, and challenge the racist, stereotypical images that dominated American popular culture—of ragged and happy black primitives, content with the social and moral dynamics of pre-bellum plantation life.

Not everyone in the 1920s shared this view about African American rural potential. Indeed, Alain Locke (whose pathbreaking anthology popularized the term the "New Negro") believed both in cultural continuity with Africa and the necessity of a break with American rural culture—that migration to cities would itself make African Americans into modern subjects. But Locke also published the work of Robert Russa Moton (Tuskegee's principal) in his anthology—which argued quite forcefully that rural

agricultural and industrial education (and the rural students that benefitted from it) were the key agents of modernity in the African American community.[5] The larger point is that there was a vital debate in the first decade of the New Negro movement about the place and meaning of rural blackness. We critics have subsequently overlooked that debate, in part because of our own cosmopolitan bias—our own historically contingent set of aesthetic and cultural judgements.

Because the New Negro movement defined itself through the connection of material life and art, this dissertation looks at both of those things in order to answer its central question about the scope and meaning of black rural modernity in the 1920s. This interdisciplinary project combines archivally-driven historical scholarship with intensely close reading of literary and artisitic works by Micheaux, Hughes, and Toomer. It connects formal artistic properties with the cultural contexts in which they were created, disseminated, and from which they drew meaning. I am particularly concerned with questions about black participation in modernity, and the degree to which rural African Americans in the 1920s were invested in the idea of radical social and aesthetic change taking place outside of American cities. To be clear, radical social and aesthetic change did not always go hand-in-hand, though this was the intent of New Negro artists. In rural America, the kinds of change affected by the literary and visual arts (as well as through less heralded vernacular creative forms such as handicrafts and music) were often modest, but no less radical or important for being so.

In recent years, most of the critical work on the Harlem Renaissance has interested itself in discovering and accounting for a broader group of creative contributors, whether by expanding the periodization of the movement beyond the 1920s,

---

5 Robert R. Moton, "Hampton-Tuskegee: Missioners of the Masses." The New Negro (reprint of the 1925 edition). (New York: Touchstone Books, 1992).

identifying important creative communities in American cities other than New York, charting transnational cultural flows, focusing on understudied works by women and sexual minorities, or by seriously examining the roles of music and the visual arts.[6] Even so, as George Hutchinson so aptly noted in his 2011 review essay "Harlem Central,"

> It seems that Harlem just will not go away. Despite never-ending arguments that we must decenter Harlem from discussions of African-American modernism, or black modernism more generally, studies continue to focus on Harlem's (and the Harlem Renaissance's) centrality to important developments in American and diasporic black cultures—whether through its contribution to new forms of intimacy and sexual identities, its importance in the struggle for civil rights before the 1940s, its relation to the emergence of black drama, its importance to this history of modern black painting and sculpture, its role in the development of black music between the world wars, and now its importance in the development of documentary photography, black photography, black modernist writing after the Harlem Renaissance, and the very idea of African American-ness in its twentieth-century form.[7]

By focusing on the rural, I am not suggesting that Harlem was unimportant; rather, as Clare Corbould and others have argued, my claim is that the cultural vitality in Harlem was not an isolated pheonomena.[8] It bears repeating that the New Negro movement took

---

6 This new inclusiveness is perhaps best exemplified by Patton and Honey's Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology, the explicit purpose of which was to bring "frequently omitted texts into dialogue with the more familiar nucleus of Harlem Renaissance writings...to encourage a more gender-balanced view of this remarkable literary awakening...to emphasize its continual unfolding. Indeed, excavation of lost literature from the period is still taking place." xxxix.

7 George Hutchinson, "Harlem Central." American Literary History 23.2 (Summer 2011): 405. Hutchinson's 1996 book The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White was a watershed in Harlem Renaissance scholarship because it demonstrated how the movement's artists engaged across racial lines in broader cultural and intellectual debates about relativism, primitivism, and literary regionalism. Published a year after Ann Douglas's Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s, the two works challenged the racial parochialism that consigned the creative movement to an artistic backwater.

8 Clare Corbould, Becoming African Americans: Black Public Life in Harlem, 1919-1939 (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009). Also, see Davarian L. Baldwin's Chicago's

place over decades and in radically different types of black communities across the country. Far from being a deterred by their rural settings, many African American rural writers in the 1920s drew energy and purpose from their peripheral position, as when Moton (Tuskegee's principal) wrote in The New Negro anthology about how America's black agricultural and industrial schools, through their self-avowedly modern curriculum and extensive teacher training programs, were paving the way for poor rural African Americans to move to and adapt to life in American cities. Harlem may have been the New Negro culture capital, but proximity to it was not a requisite for meaningful participation in the larger creative movement.

The categories of center and periphery have been useful and productive for writers in other national contexts as well, as Harsha Ram pointed out in his review essay on Georgian modernist poetry, "Modernism on the Periphery: Literary Life in Postrevolutionary Tbilisi." Ram's explaination of how a peripheral city, far from the cultural center of St. Petersburg, could position itself as not only a participant in, but also an exemplar of, Russian literary modernism is particularly germaine to discussions of how African American rural artists of the 1920s positioned themselves on a cultural continuum. Citing Marshall Berman's suggestion that St. Petersburg was viewed as the site of a "modernism of underdevelopment," Ram suggests that Tbilisi traded on its very remoteness to make a case for participation in Russia's modernist project:

> How much more fantastical might modernity have appeared in Tbilisi, a city situated on the periphery of the Russian and European cultural systems, where the "modernism of underdevelopment," already distorted by its distance from the

---

New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2007) and Mary G. Rolinson's Grassroots Garveyism: The Universal Negro Improvement Association in the Rural South, 1920-1927 (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2007).

> centers of modernity, was superimposed over local traditions of oriental commerce, colorful festivity, and urban bohemia.[9]

Far from being a deterrent, geographical distance created the very conditions under which Tbilisi could claim its own intensified experience of Russia's "warped and truncated" modernization. Ram demonstrated that there is nothing intrinsically limiting in the center/periphery dichotomy; the key is the manner in which the modernist project itself is defined and understood. Applying this same logic to an American context shows that the cultural centrality of Harlem is not the problem in defining African American modernisms; the problem is that a rural avant garde has been almost wholly left off the map of conceptual possibilities. This limited conceptualization has resulted in the almost-total erasure of rural modernity from the critical landscape. It has also often meant a too-limited engagement of the ways in which 1920s cosmopolitan practice was influenced and defined by its relationship to rural themes and forms. This dissertation offers a partial corrective by presenting the more nuanced definitions of the rural created (sometimes inadvertantly) by Toomer, Hughes, and Micheaux.

Houston Baker, in his influential 1987 book Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, argued that a defining feature of black modernism was an awareness of radical uncertainty in human life (3-5). My central contention is that one of the most radical uncertainties in interwar-period America was the changing rural landscape. Rural life was profoundly shaped by the beginnings of the Great Migration, the mass-exodus of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North and West in the early decades of the twentieth century. Scholars still debate the exact beginning and end points of the Great Migration. What is compelling, though, are the numbers: by the most conservative of estimates, 300,000 African Americans left the South between 1910 and 1920. Between

---

9 Harsha Ram, "Modernism on the Periphery: Literary Life in Postrevolutionary Tbilisi." Kritika 5.2 (Spring 2004): 369.

1920 and 1930, another 1.3 million left—a number approximately equal to the total population of the state of Florida. In the 1930s, 1.5 million people moved North, and in the 1940s, 2.5 million African Americans moved. All told, between 1900 and 1960, over 4.8 million African Americans relocated from the rural South to the urban North and West—the largest internal migration in U. S. history.[10]

The black population shift had a radical impact on rural life, and that disruption manifested itself in both the popular culture and in government programs. Many songs waxed poetic on the theme of rural outmigration during this era when sheet music was tremendously popular and influential (to the extent that pianos were considered a social necessity and were exempted from the wartime luxury tax).[11] "How 'ya gonna keep 'em down on the farm," was the question asked explicitly and repeatedly by one wildly popular 1918 song written by Joe Young, Sam M. Lewis, and Walter Donaldson; interspersed between the following chorus was a debate between a white rural couple about whether their son would return to the family farm after serving in the military during World War I:

> How 'ya gonna keep 'em down on the farmAfter they've seen Paree?
> How 'ya gonna keep 'em away from Broadway
> Jazzin around and paintin' the town
> How 'ya gonna keep 'em away from harm, that's a mystery

---

10 For migration data, see U.S. Population Censuses 1910, 1920, 1930, 1940, and Charlene Gilbert and Quinn Eli, Homecoming: The Story of African American Farmers (Boston: Beacon P, 2000): 8.

11 As David Suisman noted, "[b]y the end of World War I, the U.S. music industries produced goods worth more than $335 million; never before had those industries exerted such cultural authority or financial influence in American life. In the trenches and on the home front, music had been hailed as morally uplifting, and singing was widely promoted as a national duty." David Suisman, "Workers in the Kingdom of Culture: Black Swan Records and the Political Economy of African American Music." The Journal of American History 90.4 (March, 2004): 1296.

They'll never want to see a rake or plow
And who the deuce can parleyvous a cow?
How 'ya gonna keep 'em down on the farm
After they've seen Paree?

As Brent Hayes Edwards notes, the song was also covered by the celebrated African American musicians Ford Dabney and James Reese Europe, and had "a special resonance for African Americans" during the Great Migration,[12] when fears about post-war black rural outmigration were so pronounced that the federal government responded with special programming for African American troops. Benjamin F. Hubert, an African American agricultural college graduate and special agent for the U.S. Food Administration, was called to Europe to supervise "Agricultural Instruction for Negro Troops," and travelled throughout Europe setting up schools of agriculture "until the American Army Educational Corps was mustered out."[13]

The concern about black outmigration and the profound changes it would create in America society was not mere histrionics; the Great Migration ultimately proved to be one of the largest population shifts in human history. And like many people did during the interwar period, contemporary African American Studies has focused on the burgeoning urban populations and their creative output.[14] But not every rural African

---

12 Brent Hayes Edwards, The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003): 306-7.

13 "Some Facts About Benjamin F. Hubert." Harmon Foundation, Inc. Records, Library of Congress. Box 38; folder title "Farming 1930."

14 Some examples include Baldwin's Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life, Jacqueline Stewart's Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity (Berkeley: U of California P, 2005), Paula J. Massood's Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2003), Clare Corbould's Becoming African Americans: Black Public Life in Harlem, 1919-1939 (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009), Ann Douglass's Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995), Theresa A. Miller's New Negro Artists in Paris: African American Painters and Sculptons in the City of Light, 1922-1934 (Newark: Rutgers UP, 2001),

American was "tore up an' a-movin" to cities in the 1920s. As Carter G. Woodson noted in his 1930 report The Rural Negro:

> [t]he majority of Negroes, or sixty per cent of them, live in the country. The life of the people thus situated gives a key to the understanding of most of the group; for, while the urban Negroes are increasing in importance, the rural Negroes are still the larger factor.[15]

Urbanization was viewed by many as the trend, but African American rural life remained the norm throughout the 1920s. Outmigration profoundly shaped, but did not wholly define, black rural life, and contemporary literary scholarship has been remiss in not acknowledging both that fact and its implications for 1920s creative work. Accordingly, this dissertation examines the ways that artists used the migration narrative itself to transform the black rural majority into exotic and endangered subjects, and thus worthy of attention.[16] I demonstrate the vitality of 1920s rural black culture as both a site for creative production, and a source from which artists could draw for formal and aesthetic inspiration.

Michael Fabre's From Harlem to Paris (Champaign: U of Illinois P, 2003), Tyler Stovall's Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996), and Monica L. Miller's Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity (Durham: Duke UP, 2009). By contrast, Barbara Foley's 2003 work Spectres of 1919: Class & Nation in the Making of the New Negro (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2003) was the first book-length critical work to suggest that the year 1919 was pivotal in New Negro periodization not because of its upswing in black urban migrants, or because of urban race riots, but because of broader political shifts.

15 Carter G. Woodson, The Rural Negro (Washington, D.C.: Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1930): 22.

16 This study differs from Farrah Griffin's "Who Set You Flowin'?" The African American Migration Narrative (New York: Oxford UP, 1995) because I argue that the migration narrative is not, in fact, the dominant trope in New Negro creative work, but is instead important because it offers insights into both rural outmigration and cultural continuity—within existing rural communities and recent migrant communities, and within rural cultural forms.

These discussions of migration inevitably became discussions of modernity itself. Many Americans in the 1920s believed that rural outmigration was a social problem with a variety of solutions, rather than a fait-accompli. Numerous individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds, social classes, and geographic locations threw down the proverbial gauntlet and set about trying to reverse the trend (or at the very least stem the tide) of rural outmigration. The central feature unifying the many disparate efforts to defend American rural life in the early decades of the twentieth century was the belief that rural life needed to be modernized.[17] As Charles Denby noted, when a friend wrote in 1927 and asked if he would consider coming home to the rural South, his reply was "when all the roads were paved and there was electricity and water in every house, then I would come back to visit."[18] To some, the modernization mandate implied cultural transformation; to others, it was simply about maintaining the current status, norms, and economic viability of agrarian communities. The difficulty comes when trying to label the resulting modernization initiatives as radical or conservative, and gets to the heart of one of the central claims of this project: that the demarcation between rural modernity and modernization was often far from clear, for multiple reasons.

---

17 The rural uplift initiatives that touched the broadest cross-section of people during the period were all geared at modernizing rural life as a means of keeping people on farms: the Country Life Commission (and subsequent country-life movement), the Smith-Lever Extension Act, WWI-era rural production and conservation programs, and the expansion of the U.S. Postal Service's Rural Free Delivery program. For overviews of these programs and their impact on rural America, see Marilyn Irvin Holt's Linoleum, Better Babies & the Modern Farm Woman, David M. Kennedy's Freedom From Fear: The American People in Freedom and War, 1929-1945, and Ronald Kline's Consumers in the Country: Technology and Social Change in Rural America.

18 Charles Denby, Indignant Heart: A Black Worker's Journal (Boston: South End Press, 1978): 37.

One reason is the conservative uses to which "modernization" could be put. In Keywords, Raymond Williams' entry on the term "modern" urged caution with 19th and 20th century uses of related and derived terms, particularly "modernize" and "modernization":

> As catchwords of particular kinds of change the terms need scrutiny. It is often possible to distinguish **modernizing** and **modernization** from **modern**, if only because…the former terms imply some local alteration or improvement of what is still, basically, an old institution or system.[19]

When the prospect or evidence of rural modernity rears its head, it is often rhetorically segmented off from "true" radical visions of social change through mobilization of competing definitions of the term "modern" (and related terms) that Williams identified. This allows critics to argue (often implicitly, rather than explicitly) that those rural reformers must have been talking about "modernizing" and "modernization"—processes that are local, limited, and predicated on the maintenance of an older established order, vision, institution, or system; they couldn't possibly have believed in radical change, particularly the radical change implicit in modernity.[20]

Another reason is the radical uses to which "conservative" rhetoric were routinely put. Because 1920s black rural uplift work often involved subterfuge and doublespeak, it is frequently difficult to categorize efforts as either radical or conservative. Houston

---

19 Raymond Williams, Keywords, Revised Edition. (New York: Oxford UP, 1983): 208-9. Boldface in the original.

20 Williams was particularly attentive to the stereotypical treatments of rural life that were perpetuated through such discursive slippages. His [year] book The Country and the City argued that the pastoral (or Georgic) tradition evolved from early depictions of rural life that remained "in contact...with the real social conditions of country life" into a "Renaissance adaptation of...these classical modes" in which "step by step, these living tensions are excised," leaving only an "enamelled world" of literature that bears little relation to rural material life. Raymond Williams, The Country and the City (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1978): 16-18.

Baker noted that this ability to elide easy categorization was a key reason why Booker T. Washington's speech at the 1895 Cotton States and International Exhibition (often referred to as the "Atlanta Compromise" speech) was a triumph of black modernist oratory; by using complex racialized masking, Washington was able to simultaneously address and impress both black and white listeners—an audience thought to be irreconcilably at odds on the subject of race in America.[21] This type of masterful rural speech was not unusual. Mary Rolinson, in her 2007 book Grassroots Garveyism, pointed out that the majority of Marcus Garvey's followers were rural, and explored how rural Garveyites frequently used the tactics of doublespeak, subterfuge, and secrecy to pursue black nationalism in the racially segregated rural South—particularly in their public reports about black organizations and gatherings.[22] In her study of African American agrarian reform in Texas, Debra Reid noted that the apparent passivity of Washington enabled the black rural reformers influenced by his self-help philosophy to make changes precisely because they:

> appeared as "safe" leaders whose goals did not disrupt the labor supply or agitate for political equality. Critics said these blacks "accommodated" the white dictates. Yet, an anlysis of individuals and their objectives at the community level indicate that the agrarians believed that they could advance politically if they could attain economic equlity first. Their efforts did lead white politicians and administrators to modify their policies on several occasions. The term "accomodationist" does not reflect the complexity of these relationships.[23]

---

21 Houston Baker, Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987): 15-36.

22 Mary G. Rolinson, Grassroots Garveyism: The Universal Negro Improvement Association in the Rural South, 1920-1927 (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2007).

23 Debra Ann Reid, Reaping a Greater Harvest: African Americans, the Extension Service, and Rural Reform in Jim Crow Texas. Dissertation. (College Station, TX: Texas A&M, 2007). 5. Houston Baker noted that, for his family, Washington's approach proved similarly useful in community work: "Washington—like my father—never believed for an instant that white men and women were anything other than

In rural communities, conservative black public discourse often belied radical aims, so the radical/conservative dichotomy often proves woefully inadequate to deal with questions of creativity and social reform in the 1920s and 1930s. This dissertation aims to solve that problem of multiple registers of meaning by presenting rural documents and practices in their larger social and economic contexts, and also by routinely asking questions about reception and potential impact. In this type of inquiry, David Scott's colonial studies approach is particularly useful, as it directs our attention to the beliefs undergirding the work of past reformers:

> In short, historicizing past hopes (such as anticolonial ones) ought to entail an analysis less of the transformative projects themselves than of the ways those hopes reflect a certain understanding of the problem to be overcome...the way the sources of discontent or the obstacles to satisfaction are conceived and defined.[24]

Making sense of African American rural uplift efforts in the 1920s requires paying serious attention to the questions reformers were asking, and serious attention to the way that both the questions asked and the solutions offered reveal different conceptions of social, economic, and political problems—and aesthetic ones as well (because what was deemed modern was as often about orientation as it was about outcomes).

One of the problems that 1920s African American rural reformers routinely addressed was the vexed connection of race and aesthetics, in part because they were working against a long-established minstrel tradition that bundled blackness, rural life,

---

temporarily empowered exploiters who could be masterfully spoken out of money—money that might, in turn, be used to build a free, black nation on the ruins of a slavery the expoiters had maliciously instituted and malevolently maintained. (My father managed to conduct a successful million-dollar campaign—a good deal of money coming from white philanthropists—in a racialist Louisville, Kentucky, in order to build that city's first black hospital.)" Baker, 102.

24 David Scott, Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment (Durham: Duke UP 2004): 4-5.

laissitude, and moral dissipation.[25] The mere suggestion that rural blacks might want nicer clothes, cleaner homes, and better working conditions contradicted popular white understandings of African American desires and capacities. Alongside proposals to grow more vegetables and fruits for family consumption, and the promotion of cover crops to enrich the soil, African American rural reformers routinely addressed dress and deportment, and issued condemnations of women who chose to wear coarse homespun bandanas or wrap their hair in strings.[26] Reformers also routinely emphasized the importance of whitewashing houses and outbuildings, and planting flowerbeds along their borders. Such efforts at promoting rural aesthetic change are often dismissed by

---

25 John Henry Adams, Jr., noted in a 1906 Voice of the Negro newspaper article how these sterotypical popular culture images of black dissipation always included farmyard iconography: "No people have felt the sting of the cartoon more than we....Almost in any direction can be seen great wide mouths, thick lips, flat nones, glaring white eyes, and to wind up the thing, there close behind the caricatured is the familiar chicken coop and out beyond that is the rind of the 'dervastat'd watah million.'" Janette Faulkner and Robbin Henderson, Ethnic Notions: Black Images in the White Mind (Berkeley: Berkeley Art Center, 2000). Kevin Gaines also noted that, beginning at the turn of the century, "[t]hrough mass-produced photographs or illustrations circulated nationwide...blacks were represented in rural scenes....Often, blacks were depicted as farm workers, usually content with this status, or pictured in more leisurely pastimes. Such images of tattered, but carefree, banjo-playing, watermelon-eating blacks convinced whites that although blacks' simple joys made them virtually unexploitable, they needed to be protected from their natural inclination to indolence." Kevin K. Gaines, Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century. (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1996): 68. For surveys of racist iconography of the twentieth century, see Kenneth W. Goings, Mammy and Uncle Mose: Black Collectibles and American Stereotyping (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994), Donald Bogle, Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films (New York: Continuum, 2001), and the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University.

26 Karen J. Ferguson, "Caught in 'No Man's Land': The Negro Cooperative Demonstration Service and the Ideology of Booker T. Washington, 1900-1918." Agricultural History 72.1 (Winter 1998): 41.

critics as simple acts of bourgeois urban aping,[27] but I argue that many of these reforms had little do with cosmopolitan ambitions. Rather, together they constituted a sweeping modern aesthetic challenge to negrophobic caricatures and all of their attendant moral and biological assumptions about rural black people.

Despite their difficulties, these inquiries into conceptualization and intent matter because public and private-sector rural modernization initiatives involved millions of dollars and many thousands of individuals from both urban and rural communities, often operating with very different assumptions about the nature and meaning of uplift work. Government grants were made to bolster rural education—most notably by establishing and enlarging state agricultural and industrial universities, and their rural educational outreach programs.[28] Other initiatives, such as the Rural Free Delivery program (RFD) of the U.S. Postal Service, sought to improve farmers' quality of life by reliably connecting them to urban markets and resources. Longstanding rural self-help organizations such as the Grange were actively involved in modernization initiatives in the 1920s; individuals excluded from these older and more conservative organizations based on their race and class formed new organizations to promote the cause of rural uplift.

Myriad public- and private-sector initiatives aimed to bring technologies such as the automobile, the telephone, the radio, electrification, and modern home appliances to

---

27 Ferguson's "Caught in 'No Man's Land'" is a good example of this, as it both characterizes African American aspirations for modern rural life in the period as "anachronistic" (35), and highlights the degree to which rural demonstration programs shaped themselves around the wishes and aims of their white urban patrons.

28 As Dwight O. Holmes has noted, the 1928 budget for all seventeen black land grant colleges ($1,379,484) was roughly equivalent to what was spent annually on each white land grant college in those same states. Dwight O. Holmes, The Evolution of the Negro College (New York: Columbia UP, 1934): 150-156. The massive funding disparities between black and white universities did not preclude the former from developing and delivering extraordinary outreach programs during this decade.

the countryside. Ronald Kline's Consumers in the Country documents the ways in which rural people between the World Wars adapted technologies initially designed by and for city dwellers, after initially resisting their incursion. From changing the wheels and axels on automobiles to temporarily convert them into tractors, or propping cars on blocks in order to use them as stationary power sources; to using an electric clothes wringer to shell peas; to transforming the telephone's party line into a new virtual gathering place by broadcasting weather and market reports, playing music, and sharing community news and gossip; rural people reimagined and remade modern technologies to fit rural cultural patterns and needs. I will show that these same strategies of rural reuse extended into the realm of art and aesthetics as well. Their motives and forms differ from the more familiar allusive appropriations in modernist poetics—a sort of high-culture re-use—but, in the literary and visual art of Toomer, Hughes, and Micheaux, come to function in similar ways.

A number of rural reformers (often located at or inspired by agricultural and industrial training programs at black colleges and universities) conceived and executed outreach work specifically tailored to the needs of rural African Americans that involved energetic application of new scientific principles to all aspects of agriculture and domestic life. These modernization efforts treated such subjects as household nutrition, growing and canning food, forming small-scale agricultural cooperatives, time and motion studies of kitchen and farmyard work, and proper techniques for screen door and outhouse construction and installation. Although much of the rural modernization work done in between the World Wars was utilitarian, some of the most important initiatives were primarily conceptual. Rural reformers used consumer goods such as automobiles, linoleum flooring, and washing machines (in addition to technological advances such as electricity) as pedagogical tools for rethinking the nature and organization of farm- and

housework. These same expensive consumer goods (which were financially out of reach for many rural African Americans) were also used by reformers as generative devices to help farm residents imagine an America where the access gap between urban and rural people, and also between African Americans and whites, did not exist—and thus motivate them to make that egalitarian vision a reality.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture Farmers' Bulletin No. 1132, "Planning the Farmstead," illustrates how the rural was a self-consciously imaginative space in the interwar period. This pamphlet, published in 1920, focused on the commonalities shared by many types of farms, and provided design guidelines for addressing common issues. But its authors also explicitly stated that they did not expect farm owners to actually implement most of the changes they recommended (because of the impracticality and prohibitive expense):

> Very few established farmers are in a position to tear down all their old structures, and to build entirely anew, or to move to a new location, but a great many farms can be improved by moving or remodeling some of the buildings in order to save the time and energy of the workmen in the performance of routine work....Possessed of the plans for an attractive home, the farm family has something toward which to work, an incentive to thrift and economy in the operation of the farm, and a tie to farm and home life not easily broken.[29]

The authors explained the pamphlet as a kind of planning exercise—a way to imagine an ideal modern rural home, and think about the ways in which these principles and ideas could be adapted to real-world situations. Farmers were not expected to change a farmhouse's orientation to a nearby road, or alter the course and direction of acres of furrows, or move a barn or other large outbuilding to minimize the number of steps it would take for them to carry out routine tasks. But they were expected to think broadly

---

29 M. C. Betts and W. R. Humphries, "Planning the Farmstead." U.S. Department of Agriculture, Farmers' Bulletin No. 1132 (August, 1920): 4-5.

and ambitiously about how to organize and carry out their day-to-day farm work, and to see those superficially small efforts as part of a larger social movement to modernize rural life. For some reformers, those new conceptualizations were part of an effort to maintain the current social order and practices. For others, they were more like Le Corbusier's contemporaneous move towards a new architecture—an attempt to conceive an entirely new rural black life and aesthetics. My contention is that many New Negro artists used the rural in a similar fashion in the first decade of that creative movement—as an imaginative space in which they could eschew practical constraints, and ask and answer questions about black aesthetics, identity, history, and potential.

New Negro writers asserted that their art shaped how people understood themselves and were understood by others. Accordingly, this project examines both creative representations, and how literary and cinematic works related to the material lives and struggles of rural African Americans. To be clear, I am not claiming that the New Negro focus on art as a tool for fighting anti-black racism was wholly unique. As Kenneth Warren has pointed out, what defined African American literature from roughly 1890-1970 was "not simply what writers felt, but a social situation in which literature could reasonably be seen as performing a political function despite of or in accordance with the author's intent."[30] The three artists in my study had very different relationships with politics and racial uplift. Oscar Micheaux frequently described his early movies as tools in the fight against anti-black racism, and battled against many who believed that uplifting the race required only positive depictions of black characters on screen. Langston Hughes was a key participant in important New Negro movement debates about

30 Kenneth Warren and Henry Louis Gates Jr., "The End of African-American Literature?" Live Chat. The Chronicle of Higher Education, March 1, 2011. <http://chronicle.com/article/Live-Chat-The-End-of/126492/?sid=at&utm_source=at&utm_medium=en>

the role and nature of black literature, and argued in the 1920s that black working-class culture was the wellspring of the movement's creative vitality. But two decades later, Hughes poked fun at the movement's own early claims of success in the fight against racism, stating in his autobiography that "[t]he ordinary Negroes hadn't heard of the Harlem Renaissance. And if they had, it hadn't raised their wages any."[31] Jean Toomer published some of his early work in Alain Locke's seminal The New Negro anthology in 1925, but over the course of the decade grew increasingly uncomfortable with being categorized as a Negro writer, and ultimately came to believe that racial categorization itself was misleading and reductive.

My three-chapter dissertation contains extended sections that combine intensely close literary analysis and historical argument. **Chapter One, "Modern By Accident: Jean Toomer, Literary Experiment, and Rural Blackness,"** focuses on Toomer's 1923 book Cane and the conditions of its writing—specifically, Toomer's short visits to Sparta, Georgia and Spartanburg, South Carolina. Toomer drew inspiration and material for Cane from these two trips, and was ultimately lauded by many contemporary critics for accurately capturing the South in his writing. The truth of the matter is more complicated. I contend that although Toomer viewed the rural residents of Georgia and South Carolina as primitives, his experiments with fragmented narrative and temporal sequences inadvertently produced literary depictions of modern rural subjects. Further, I argue that by focusing on sensational anti-black violence, and displacing real lynchings and murders committed elsewhere onto this particular rural community, Toomer distorted the character of the rural school at which he taught (the Sparta Agricultural and Industrial Institute) and the nature of local anti-black violence. He also glossed over the very real

31 Langston Huges, The Big Sea (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993): 228.

catastrophe that befell the black community during the two months of his visit—the arrival of the boll weevil, and the resulting decimation of the local cotton economy—which made the demise of southern agriculture in Cane seem natural and inevitable, rather than contingent and historically specific.

Langston Hughes is the New Negro poet most closely associated with Harlem and urban life, in part because many of his poems from the 1920s were set in, and talked about, black popular culture in that New York City neighborhood. Depicting everyday black urban life was an innovation in poetic content that immediately garnered Hughes both acclaim and condemnation. One less heralded feature of these writings is the extent to which he depicts urban existence through the figures of recent migrants to northern cities. In Hughes's blues poems in particular, the city is often described by people who live there but do not consider it home. **Chapter Two, "Langston Hughes: The Country and the City,"** traces the evolution of Hughes's blues stanza (a literary form he created), and argues that the young writer invented the new poetic form in order to embody the continuing presence of the black countryside in the modern city. My contention is that by devising a stylized black dialect for both his urban and rural speakers, Hughes collapsed the distinctions between northern and southern experience and challenged the notion that folk speech was inadequate to capture the nuances of modern black life. He refuted the idea that folk speech was exclusively southern by putting it in the mouths of urban black northerners. The latter half of the chapter discusses Hughes's travels in rural America in the 1920s, and the circulation of and commentary on his poems in rural publications. Russ Castronovo has argued persuasively that writers such as W. E. B. DuBois conveyed complex meanings through the editorial juxtaposition of materials in Harlem Renaissance journals such as the Crisis—that the meaning of particular poems, essays, or images was

in part created through context.[32] Similarly, I contend that rural journals that reprinted urban creative works often did so in ways that suggested distinctive thematic emphases and meanings. Through a case study of the journal of a black Catholic agricultural and industrial high school in rural Maryland called the Cardinal's Notebook, I explore how Hughes's thematically urban poems were re-used in important ways by the editorial practices of rural publishers.

Chapter Three, "Oscar Micheaux: Rural Life, Audiences, and Aesthetics," examines the novels, race movies, film company publicity, and newspaper editorials of black writer and filmmaker Oscar Micheaux. Micheaux is often tied to the expanding urban black movie-going culture that Jacqueline Stewart documented in Migrating to the Movies. Viewing him as a businessman rather than an artist, critics have tended to dismiss his frequent depictions of rural life as simple acts of autobiographical mythmaking.[33] I argue instead that Micheaux's artwork and marketing strategies are indicative of a complex and sustained creative interest in and relationship with rural issues and audiences. Taken as a whole, Micheaux's body of work posited a twist on the narrative of inevitable black Southern outmigration; the choice he presented was not between the oppressive rural South and the liberating urban North, but rather between Old America and the West, which he depicted as a new racial frontier in which independent farming, ranching, and mining were viable options for New Negro life. Micheaux moved New Negro art away from the North/South binary by focusing his gaze

---

32 Russ Castronovo, "Beauty along the Color Line: Lynching, Aesthetics, and the Crisis." PMLA 121.5 (October 2006): 1443-1459.

33 Charlene Regester's review essay on Micheaux scholarship documents the range of authors who have, in one way or another, endorsed this position. Charlene Regester, "The Misreading and Rereading of African American Filmmaker Oscar Micheaux: A Critical Review of Micheaux Scholarship," Film History 7.4 (Winter 1995): 426-449.

(and his lens) on a myriad of rural places: Mississippi, South Dakota, and Canada. The first part of the chapter uses the silent film Symbol of the Unconquered to argue against one of the most common criticisms of Micheaux's cinematic work: its amateurish reuse of film footage, plots, and characters from his earlier films and novels. Building on the logic of rural modernity, self-sufficiency, and reuse of materials popularized during World War I, my suggestion is that Micheaux's recycling of material is both anti-Hollywood and rural-centric—that his creative recycling was a rural-inflected form of modern creative production. I argue that Micheaux's rural film aesthetics were manifested not only on the more obvious levels of character, setting, and plot, but also in the structure and juxtaposition of his cinematic shots themselves. The latter part of the chapter examines one of the three extant films Micheaux circulated in the 1920s: Within Our Gates. As with many of Micheaux's early films, Within Our Gates played extensively in the American South. I detail the locations and venues in which the film was shown during the first three months of 1920 as a point of departure to examine the significance of Micheaux's films in a predominantly rural region, playing to audiences largely made up of rural people and recent urban migrants.

Although each chapter in this dissertation focuses on one figure without recourse to the others, I develop some of my larger themes and arguments about art and 1920s black rural life across chapters. Chapter One's discussion of the Sparta Agricultural and Industrial Institute functions as a primer on gender and pedagogy at rural agricultural and industrial schools, an introduction to the complex economic pressures brought to bear on agrarian communities, and a window into the sometimes surprising and tenacious connections between urban and rural people in the 1920s. This understanding of the reciprocal relationships that existed between rural and urban communities is expanded in Chapter Two's discussion of rural publications and editorial practices, and culminates in

Chapter Three's positing of a "near-rural" designation for urban places that maintained particular cultural and economic ties with their surrounding rural hinterlands. The theme of temporality is also explored across the chapters. Toomer's ideological commitments led him to connect geography and temporality, and to characterize rural people and places as fundamentally set apart from (and endangered by) the modern world. The young poet used the image of dusk in Cane to evoke the impending demise of the rural culture he depicted. By contrast, from the very epigraph of Fine Clothes to the Jew, Hughes turned the conventional associations of dusk with closure, decline, and demise on their heads, and presented twilight instead as a harbinger of song:

> Sun's a settin',
> This is what I'm gonna sing.
> Sun's a settin',
> This is what I'm gonna sing:
> I feels de blues a comin',
> Wonder what de blues'll bring?[34]

Hughes used symbolic temporal reversals to signal an affinity with the rural musical roots of his blues poems. He also bent the time of the single musical blues line across two poetic lines, thus creating the blues sestet—a stanza form with distinctive pacing and rhythm that Hughes still managed to use to evoke the rural musical form on which it was modeled. Oscar Micheaux, too, used time as a means to work against the notion of rural alterity. In fiction, he did this by exploring the subjective temporality of western farming, as when the rural protagonist in his 1913 novel, The Conquest, reflected "I could not help but feel that the world moved swiftly."[35] In film, Micheaux destabilized viewers' notions of rural temporality by juxtaposing cutting-edge shot types and cinematic anachronisms.

---

34 Langston Hughes, Fine Clothes to the Jew (New York: Knopf, 1927): 17.

35 Oscar Micheaux, The Conquest: Story of a Negro Pioneer. (New York: Washington Square P, 2003): 138.

In methodological terms, the three chapters aim to show how combining biographical, historical, cultural, and formalist literary critical approaches results in a richer and more accurate account of art and its relationship to black social and political life. Sequence matters, as part of my argument for the reintroduction of literary critical methods of close reading (which have fallen out of favor in American Studies because of their associations with both the consensualist ideology of the myth and symbol school and the relativism of many of the New Critics)[36] relies on two early demonstrations of the pitfalls of biographical criticism: first in the case of Toomer (whose aesthetic commitments inadvertantly trumped his ideological stance on black rural life) and second in the case of Hughes (whose early blues stanzas have long been mischaracterized as urban because of an overreliance on the historical context and circumstances of the poems' creation). The inadvertant rural modernity of Toomer provides a springboard into the more complicated rural poetic affiliations of Hughes. Discussion of Hughes's early blues poetics—particularly, his conflation of rural and urban speech, and cross-genre creative influences—sets the stage for dealing with the complex and fragmentary evidence provided by Micheaux's films and business records, and the critical reception he received in the black press.

This combination of methods was one of the most difficult parts of the project—figuring out exactly how to reclaim and expand techniques of literary analysis that were fruitful for Americanists in the 1940s and '50s, but have since been jettisoned as

---

36 For a synopsis of this disciplinary history, see Henry Nash Smith, "Can 'American Studies' Develop a Method?" and commentary by Lawrence Buell; "Literature and the Historian," by R. Gordon Kelly and commentary by Sharon O'Brien; "Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance" by Houston A. Baker, Jr. and commentary by Robert Stepto; and "A New Context for a New American Studies" by Robert Berkhofer Jr. and commentary by Barry Shank; in Lucy Maddox, ed., Locating American Studies: The Evolution of a Discipline (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999).

antithetical to serious cultural studies work. It bothers me that sustained attention to literary form is widely seen as regressive—particularly because I study Langston Hughes, who was a fierce and amazing formal innovator. The contemporary bias against literary formalism reminds me of a moment in the 1920s, when James Weldon Johnson (and many others) staunchly maintained that black dialect could not convey the complexity of modern urban life. And then Hughes wrote Fine Clothes to the Jew in dialect—possibly the most important and accomplished poetic work of the New Negro movement.

It makes sense that African Americans the 1920s questioned the use of dialect, abused as it was by artists who had little interest in black uplift and racial equality. And it makes sense to me also that Hughes reclaimed a speech form that had been so abused, and used it to make a statement about black cultural vitality and urban-rural interconnection. Likewise, it makes sense that contemporary critics reject the kinds of formal analysis that seem tied to American exceptionalism—and to racist assessments of American creative production that for so long excluded artists like Hughes from the literary canon.[37] But following Hughes, what I am attempting to do here is reclaim

[37] Henry Louis Gates described a similar critical objection to literary theory in his Introduction to Figures in Black: "Let me put the question in the baldest manner: How 'white' is literary theory? How 'black' can a criticism be which is related to one of the several modes of analysis commonly grouped under a rubric of structural or post-structural criticism?....can we escape the supposed racism of so many theorists of criticism, from David Hume and Immanuel Kant through the Southern Agrarians? Can it be a legitimate exercise to translate theories drawn from a literary tradition that has often been perpetuated by white males who represent blacks in their fictions as barely human, if they deem it necessary to figure blacks at all? Aren't we justified in being suspicious of a discourse in which blacks are signs of absence?" Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self (New York: Oxford UP, 1989): xviii.

formalism itself as a vital part of the New Negro intellectual legacy. Because sometimes the form is the story; sometimes the form itself tells a story.[38]

One of the central, forgotten stories of the New Negro movement is of continuing engagement with rural life and rural themes. In addition to offering this different perspective on rural participation in the New Negro movement, I hope my dissertation also succeeds as a methodological intervention—an opening up of possibilities for how we use literary works in African American studies.

I chose to write about Toomer, Hughes, and Micheaux in this dissertation in part because of their geographic diversity—they are artists who hailed from different parts of the country, and focused creatively on different regions. Another aim was to present a range of creative forms: poetry, prose, and film. A third motivation was these artists' notoriety. I hope to show that negotiations with rural identity and culture were central to even the best-known creative work of the period, and that it is only because of our own critical preoccupations that this facet of New Negro art has remained hidden in plain view. What the work of Toomer, Hughes, and Micheaux makes evident is that the Negro "culture capital" in Harlem defined itself not so much against as in conversation with rural source-material, audiences, and creative forms. To be clear, there was no absolute black consensus about the meaning of and prospects for life in the country—competing visions of the rural animated the New Negro movement. As Paulla Ebron has noted, there

[38] I have chosen this approach because I think that when we critics fail to attend to the constellation of formal properties of a creative work, we make mistakes—and often big ones. I am thinking here about the moment in The Practise of Diaspora when Brent Hayes Edwards characterizes Langston Hughes's early blues poems as urban simply because they are short—and thus reflect the physical constraints of the 3-minute recordings that were commercially available in the 1920s, rather than the open-ended rural blues songs that could vary in length because they were only performed live.

were many Harlem Renaissance writers who "were trying to suppress remembrances of the [rural] South rather than revive them," because they saw "an emergent urban culture...as the true site of African American culture."[39] Conversely, as Hazel Carby has documented, the now immensely popular Zora Neale Hurston identified "authentic" black culture as exclusively rural.[40] The rural South in particular was seen as both the source and antithesis of black modernity, and these opposing views were held in productive tension in both well- and little-known period writings and films. It is that productive tension that I seek to identify and make part of the conversation about African American life and art in the early twentieth century.

Beyond offering a detailed critical assessment of Hurston's rural representations, Carby's 1994 essay raised the important issue of essentializing rural subjects:

> [i]n Hurston's work the rural black folk become an aesthetic principle, a means by which to embody a rich oral culture. Hurston's representation of the folk is not only a discursive displacement of the historical and cultural transformations of migration but it is also a creation of a folk who are outside of history....What the New York Times has called Hurston's "strong African-American sensibility," and is generally agreed to be her positive, holistic celebration of black life, also needs to be seen as a representation of "Negroeness" as an unchanging, essential entity.[41]

Most of Hurston's major publications took place in the 1930s, putting them outside the scope of this study. Nonetheless, I think it is important to state that, while I am not so sure as Carby that Hurston's ideological positions about rural authenticity were clearly reflected in her fiction, I agree that idealized depictions of rural people in New Negro art

---

39 Paulla A. Ebron, "Enchanted Memories of Regional Difference in African American Culture." American Anthropologist 100.1 (March 1998): 101.

40 Hazel Carby, "The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston." Genevieve Fabre and Robert O'Meally, eds, History and Memory in African American Culture (New York: Oxford UP, 1994): 28-44.

41 Carby, 32.

deserve more sustained critical attention. This concern affected the selection of the artists in this study. I sought to include authors with profoundly different views about, and relationships with, rural people and communities in order to explore the degree to which artists' thoughts and feelings about their rural subjects translated into their creative work. What I found was, as often as not, artists' personal views about rural life were subsumed or complicated by other concerns, particularly aesthetic ones.

Carby was one of the first critics to be concerned about Hurston's romanticization of rural subjects, and about utopian literary representations that were meant to "stabilize and displace the social contradictions and disruption" of the 1930s—a decade characterized by accelerated black rural outmigration and the transformation of rural folk culture.[42] Yet Toomer's earlier erasure of the boll weevil crisis in Cane (discussed in Chapter One) shows that mindfulness about migration was itself not a cure-all for rural nostalgia and oversimplification. Indeed, certain claims about the inevitability of migration can be historically misleading precisely because they assume the proximate demise of black agricultural aspirations—an opinion which was far from universal during the 1920s, particularly in black rural communities, because of tangible social, economic, and creative advances. The same decade that saw the apex of Ku Klux Klan membership, and widespread enactment of vagrancy laws designed to control the movement of black agricultural workers, also saw massive rural educational reform efforts—and the largest numbers of black farmowners in the country's history. In the 1920s, hundreds of thousands of black families realized (after years, sometimes generations, of struggle) the post-emancipation dream of owning 40 acres and a mule. White fears about black outmigration led some landowners to improve living and working conditions in order to

42 Carby, 32.

retain their black agricultural work forces. Even the 1927 Mississippi River flood, which submerged 27,000 square miles across seven states, was looked upon by many rural blacks as a remedy for oppressive sharecropping conditions—both because it would immediately enable large numbers of agricultural workers to leave the South without reprisals, and because the floodwaters were thought to have voided the debts of black sharecroppers and tenant farmers to white landowners.

It was as a decade of both spectacular and routine anti-black violence and discrimination; but it was also a time of possibility and modernization. African American rural reformers, encouraged by seed money and support from white philanthropies such as the Jeanes, Rosenwald, and Slater Funds, instantiated a massive schoolbuilding program in the rural South aimed at educating African American children whose needs were routinely neglected by racist local school boards. Black agricultural colleges such as Hampton and Tuskegee, as well as many lesser-known campuses, trained rural teachers to staff these new schools, and also prepared their graduates to found new institutions in America's hinterlands. These same agricultural and industrial schools also designed and implemented wide-scale extension work programs to teach non-enrolled rural men, women, and children about the latest advances in farming, food preservation, and rural home management.

Questions of land ownership were intimately bound up with questions of African American farm work and agency. In her 2000 book Homecoming, documentary filmmaker Charlene Gilbert reflected on the lives of her great-grandparents, Viccie and Bill Mathis:

> I am sure that Viccie and Bill had no way of knowing what their union would produce at the very beginning of the twentieth century....For some reason, despite the waves of people leaving the South, they decided...to stay and build a life. They settled in Macon County, where between 1901 and 1924 my great-

> grandmother gave birth to fourteen children. In between giving birth, Viccie helped her husband farm rented land in both Dooly and Macon Counties. They rented the land from Leon Harrison, a local white landowner.
>
> Having the opportunity to rent some land rather than only sharecropping it made the difference for Bill and Viccie. By 1926 they had saved enough money to buy their own two-hundred-acre farm....It took twenty-six years, but they did it. They became the first in their families to own the land they worked. It was a small farm, a small act, in a small place, but it changed the lives of their children and their children's children.[43]

Gilbert highlighted the difference between sharecropping, renting, and owning land. This distinction is important because, despite the fact that the majority of black agricultural workers in the 1920s were sharecroppers, the contemporary connotations of that word flatten the multitude of relationships that existed between black farm workers and property owners, and the resulting levels of black autonomy. Sharecropping was not a uniform system. If a sharecropping family owned their own tools or draft animals, they were in a stronger negotiating position. Sharecroppers regularly negotiated "share tenancy," "half tenancy," and other complex agreements regarding the percentage of crops they owed to landlords in exchange for cultivation rights, as well as whether they and their families had grazing rights for livestock, usufruct rights to wild foods growing on the property, the right to grow feed crops for livestock, and the right to grow vegetables and fruits for home consumption. A further problem with the term "sharecropper" is that it excludes the numerous black agricultural laborers who worked for wages, and had the least autonomy in how they performed their work, but also had the freedom that regular cash wages brought—which was nothing to scoff at in many habitually cash-poor rural communities. For these reasons, I use the term "farmer" to refer to the range of black agricultural workers, although it tended to be reserved for only male farm owners in the interwar period.

---

43 Gilbert and Eli, 36.

There have been numerous studies of the complex relationships between African American artists and white employers, patrons, and publishers in the 1920s, the most influential of which being Hutchinson's 1996 The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White.[44] There have also been sustained conversations about the successive waves of popular "local color" dialect writing penned by early twentieth century white authors who made their livings through representations of rural black subjects. But literary critics have been less interested in documenting the myriad ways that African American artists such as Toomer, Micheaux, and Hughes made part of their living through aesthetic representations of black rural life. Part of what I explore in this study are the ways in which these three artists made their livings or literary reputations through their creative explorations of black rural life, but a more substantial part is the way they devised the formal innovations of their art through those same means.

The black farmers who lived in the South, and the artists who visited there, all experienced an uneven landscape of race relations. Mark Schultz, in The Rural Face of White Supremacy, wrote against the idea of a "Solid South," noting that the term "suggests unanimity of belief and action at the points where white southerners dealt with

---

44 This category was initially dominated by discussions of literary patronage in artist biographies, such as Robert E. Hemenway's Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography (Champaign: U of Illinois P, 1977), and single-author studies such as Faith Berry's "Black Poets, White Patrons: The Harlem Renaissance Years of Langston Hughes" (Crisis 88.6, July 1981: 278-83) and Jane Marcus's "Bonding and Bondage: Nancy Cunard and the Making of the Negro Anthology," printed in Mae G. Henderson's Borders, Boundaries, and Frames: Essays in Cultural Criticism and Cultural Studies (New York: Routledge, 1995). The category now includes a range of works with a broader scope, including Ann Douglas's Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1995); the PBS documentary "Against the Odds: The Artists of the Harlem Renaissance" (Boston: PBS, 1998), which focuses on Harmon Foundation-funded visual artists; and John K.Young's Black Writers, White Publishers: Marketplace Politics in Twentieth-Century African American Literature (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2006).

African Americans." Shuttz identified the competing interests of poor, middle-class, and white elite southerners; the cultural differences between southern subregions; and the dissenting perspectives of African American residents who did not subscribe to notions of white superiority as obvious fracture points in the fascade of southern uniformity. Schultz noted that:

> [t]he official symbols of the South were indeed solid by the turn of the twentieth century, but public symbols reflect hopes and fears as much as they do experienced reality. Instead of exploring the Solid South as an abstraction, we might do better to examine it in local places...to detail how it was observed and suspended in actual experience."[45]

This emphasis on the importance of local studies is particularly astute, as many of the models of racial violence and exclusion that scholars rely on to understand 1920s rural life were derived from urban communities with very different racial norms and dynamics. As Elizabeth Abel notes in her recent study of Jim Crow iconography, the practices of racial segregation "originated as attempts to regulate the expanded opportunities for interracial contact afforded by urban life in the North as well as the South" (emphasis mine).[46] In many communities, extensive interracial contact was normal. As Jennifer Ritterhouse has noted, interracial contact, particularly during childhood, provided opportunities for white and black southerners to learn racial etiquette, "both the racial roles they were expected to play in their society and a sense of themselves as being 'black' or 'white.'"[47] Whereas the occasions of adult interracial contact were extensively

---

45 Mark Schultz, The Rural Face of White Supremacy (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2005): 5.

46 Elizabeth Abel, Signs of the Times: The Visual Politics of Jim Crow (Berkeley: U of California P, 2010): 4.

47 Jennifer Ritterhouse, Growing Up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2006): 2.

circumscribed in urban communities, in rural communities things were often quite different.

For example, in Hancock County, Georgia (the rural community on which Toomer based the southern sections of Cane), there was very little residential segregation in the 1920s; local schools were segregated, but many blacks and whites worked side by side in the cotton fields throughout their lives, shopped in the same stores when they went into town, and sometimes worshipped in the same churches.[48] Even the powerful community taboo against blacks and whites eating together was violated by white planters with the social and economic clout to disregard the custom in their own households. Rather than a uniform Jim Crow landscape with predictable and consistently enforced racial barriers, rural America (and the rural South in particular) presented an unpredictable landscape of varying local norms and practices. Toomer's protagonist Ralph Kabnis experienced the problem that local variability posed for newcomers—the near-maddening prospect of ascertaining whether or not one was in mortal danger from hostile whites, of figuring out how to behave in the absence of immediately legible racial codes.

Inquiries into the meaning and influence of Jim Crow—and its relationship to modernism, modernity, and agency—are often central to contemporary literary critical engagements of works by Toomer, Hughes, and Micheaux. Many scholarly works on black modernity (including this one) owe a great deal to Houston Baker's 1987 Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, which foregrounded formal analysis of Harlem Renaissance literature and expressive culture, and also made a critical space in which African American artists could be imagined as agents of modernism, rather than merely

48 Schultz, 66-95.

its objects or victims. In 1987, Baker was focused on modernism—an aesthetic category defined by literary techniques, devices, and modes of representation. But in 2001, Baker redefined modernism as modernity (which concerns itself primarily with social relations and tendencies in intellectual culture) without actually changing his terminology; he took a further step away from his earlier methods of traditional literary analysis; and he also dramatically reversed his previous conclusions about African American agency in the early decades of the twentieth century.[49] In Turning South Again: Rethinking Modernism/Re-reading Booker T, Baker declared that black modernism in the main did not and could not exist because American—and particularly southern—racial regimes imposed too many constraints to allow black people to truly experience or believe in meaningful mobility and change.[50] Gone was Baker's belief in a field of expressive possibilities for interwar-period black southerners. Gone also was the belief in "the fluid and always interdependent relationship between mastery and deformation."[51]

Recent critiques have charged Baker with being trapped by the demands of his critical moment. Jonathan Holloway's forthcoming Jim Crow Wisdom (which examines how blacks claimed a privileged moral space in America from 1941-2000 by developing

---

49 Contemporary scholarship on Afro-modernity focuses simultaneously on both intellectual formations and what Paul Gilroy termed the "counterculture of modernity," the lived black experiences of commodification and dislocation in the trans-Atlantic slave trade and plantation slavery; scholars often focus on the ways in which black agency is attenuated and constrained by the brutal absurdities of diasporic capitalism and its attendant racial formations. For examples of this approach, see Paul Gilroy, The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993) and David Scott, Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment (Durham: Duke UP, 2004).

50 Houston A. Baker, Jr., Turning South Again: Rethinking Modernism/Re-reading Booker T (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2001).

51 Houston A. Baker, Jr., Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987): 68.

carefully defined interpretations of the discriminatory place to which white society assigned them) provides a compelling account of the demands of the "Jim Crow moment" in twentieth century black memoir—demands strong enough to elicit a reversal on questions of black modernism and modernity. Although Holloway does not engage Baker's work directly, Turning South Again is very much a hybrid text—part conventional academic monograph, part autobiographical reflection—and, I would argue, subject to the same formal pressures.

I raise the issue of Baker's scholarly reversal here for slightly different reasons: because it sheds light on questions of method and belief. Can we, as twenty-first century scholars, believe in modern black rurals—people who at the beginning of the last century believed in radical change and social transformation? Are we willing to entertain this possibility, even if it flies in the face of long- and closely-held assumptions about history and politics, and forces us to reconsider our disciplinary methods? The current critical situations in both African American studies and American Studies call to mind a passage from Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel Invisible Man, in which the unnamed protagonist remembers the death of his grandfather (an ex-slave):

> But my grandfather is the one. He was an odd old guy, my grandfather, and I am told I take after him. It was he who caused the trouble. On his death-bed he called my father to him and said, "Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open." They thought the old man had gone out of his mind. He had been the meekest of men. The younger children were rushed from the room, the shades drawn and the flame of the lamp turned so low it sputtered on the wick like the old man's breathing. "Learn it to the younguns," he whispered fiercely; then he died.[52]

52 Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (New York: Vintage International, 1995): 16.

According to the narrator in Invisible Man, the patriarch of the family was a person who cheerfully conformed to the existing racial regime and its norms of extreme social segregation. The narrator reflected that his grandparents "stayed in their place, worked hard, and brought up my father to do the same."[53] The death-bed scene challenged this perception, with the grandfather's interpretation of his life and intent (militancy, radicalism) at odds with the ways in which his actions and beliefs were interpreted by his family. But the family's response was not to revise their opinions about the past. Instead, they labeled the grandfather's last words as crazy, rushed the young children out of the room, and shrouded the dying man in near darkness; they closed all the curtains, and dimmed the one light to the point of instability.

As Ellison's protagonist suggests, the status of this knowledge is questionable, coming as it does at the eleventh hour, and seeming so diametrically opposed to everything else conveyed by his grandfather's life. But even more credible testimonies and evidence about modern black rurals were difficult for some artists and critics to accept in the 1920s. Alain Locke maintained in 1925 that migration to cities was the only way for African Americans to be modern—that the wide-scale rural-to-urban rural outmigration was a manifestation of an emergent modern spirit that he termed the New Negro movement.[54] In that same anthology, Robert Moton talked about the modernizing effect of black agricultural and vocational education. According to Moton, it was agricultural education that created modern black people ready to change the existing social order. What made modern blackness—the country or the city—was a live issue,

---

53 Ibid.

54 Alain Locke, The New Negro, quoted in Vassiliki Kolocotroni et al, eds, Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998). pp. 411-417.

hotly contested, and a key debate that has all but entirely disappeared from our contemporary accounts of the 1920s.

Baker's contemporary critical reversals point to the complexity of these questions about African American agency. But they have also led me to think about parallels between the contemporary accusations routinely leveled against African American rural people in the 1920s and the accusations that Baker once set out to debunk about Harlem Renaissance artists: that they did conventional work and failed to innovate, and that their uplift movement as a whole was naïve and a failure. Back in the day, Baker believed that formalism could tell us something about black modernism. It is my present conviction that the literary critical approach he ultimately eschewed can still show us important things about modernism when it is combined with archival and biographical scholarship. It can also illuminate the complex relationship of art to rural social and intellectual formations. That is, taken together they can still tell us something about black modernity. It is a question of method as well as substance, and this dissertation addresses both.

Chapter 1. Modern By Accident: Jean Toomer, Literary Experiment, and Rural Blackness

> Hampton and Tuskegee and Points North! A call like this has been sounding in every important railroad center in the South since 1915….It has been the signal for thousands of Negroes to gather their bundles, dress-suit cases and lunch boxes, and board the trains for the great industrial centers of the North…all of them have been impelled by a vision, sometimes vague and dim, sometimes sharp and clear, of better wages, better living conditions and better opportunities than have been theirs on farms and plantations of the South.[1]

The above quote from the opening of Robert Russa Moton's essay in The New Negro anthology of 1925 participated in a familiar argument linking the New Negro creative movement with the literal movement of African American people from the rural South to the urban North. However, after describing bustling rural train stations, and noting the scale and steadiness of the black migration, Moton did something unusual. He credited black agricultural schools with preparing African Americans to move and adapt to cities:[2]

---

1 Alain Locke, ed. The New Negro (reprint of the 1925 edition). (New York: Touchstone Books, 1992): 323.

2 As Moton was well aware, these Tuskegee-enabled rural-to-urban migrations took place both within and across national boundaries. Frank Guridy, building on James Clifford's claim that "[d]ecentered, lateral connections may be as important as those formed around a teleology of origin/return," argued that Tuskegee was an important diasporic site for both African Americans and Afro-Cubans in the first half of the twentieth century "when Afro-Cuban parents sent their sons and daughters to get an education at Tuskegee Institue in the heart of Jim Crow Alabama." Guridy noted that Afro-Cuban alumni, as well as numerous others who studied at Tuskegee-inspired schools in Cuba, "were empowered by Washingtonian racial uplift, not to become good farmers or domestic workers, but to become black professionals and entrepreneurs." Moreover, the connections forged by this early educational exchange, created diasporic "routes" between the two countries that endured for generations, and provided new urban and rural destinations for African American migrants. Guridy's research calls into question the vast body of scholarship that characterized "Booker T. Washington and his followers as 'accommodationists' while his rival W. E. B. Du Bois and his 'Talented

> [F]or nearly fifty years strong influences had been at work among the Negroes which enabled them to adapt themselves more quickly to the change from rural to urban life and from agricultural to industrial pursuits….[T]here was a mighty influence at work below Mason and Dixon's Line enlarging the outlook of the Negro and preparing the race not only to take advantage of new opportunities but to create opportunities for themselves in the midst of surrounding conditions. This influence was the Hampton-Tuskegee movement inaugurated by General Chapman Armstrong at Hampton, Virginia, in 1868 and expanded by his pupil, Booker T. Washington, at Tuskegee, in the years succeeding through the remarkable spread of his gospel of industry and self-reliance throughout the whole of the Negro race.[3]

Moton's essay "Hampton-Tuskegee: Missioners of the Masses" is important because it explicitly linked rural institutions with black modernity. As Booker T. Washington's successor to the presidency of Tuskegee, the college most frequently lauded as the model for black agricultural and industrial education in the United States, and indeed around the world,[4] Moton was in a unique position to comment. Indeed, the very term "New Negro" was coined by Washington in 1900, and by the 1920s was used by black rural people throughout the country to talk about the links between creativity and uplift.[5] Moton's essay, although it included rural blacks in his vision of modernity and progress, made that claim by focusing on rural contributions to urban life. Moton did not talk about the

---

Tenth' adherents were positioned as more progressive (and internationalist) historical actors." Frank Guridy, Forging Diaspora: Afro-Cubans and African Americans in a World of Empire and Jim Crow. (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2010): 4-5, 20-21.

3 Locke, 324.

4 Frank Guridy noted that, "[i]n the two decades before the emergence of Harlem as a black political and culture capital, one could argue, Tuskegee was the prime epicenter of Afro-diasporic activity in the world," both as an exporter of an agricultural and industrial educational philosophy and method known as the "Hampton-Tuskegee Idea" that was enthusiastically applied by philanthropists and colonial officials throughout the African continent, and as a host for international gatherings such as the 1912 International Conference on the Negro. Guridy, 22-3.

5 Washington coined the term in his book A New Negro for a New Century, published in 1900.

impact of black modernity in the countryside, although Tuskegee was the epicenter of much of that rural uplift work: farmers conferences, school building initiatives, the Movable School Force extension program, annual Negro Health campaigns, poultry clubs, canning cooperatives, and numerous publications that showed rural people how to apply modern scientific and management principles to their day-to-day work.[6] Despite the massive scale and vitality of these rural modernization programs in the South, Moton chose in "Hampton-Tuskegee: Missioners to the Masses" to downplay the complex, transformative impact of this work on southern farms and plantations. Reading between the lines of his and others' accounts in canonical Harlem Renaissance works is necessary to understand both the complex representations of black rural people in 1920s literature, and the important contributions to modernity made by the black majority who lived in and reshaped rural America in this decade, particularly the rural South.

Although a number of the essays and creative pieces in the 1925 New Negro anthology treated black experiences in the rural South, aside from Moton's essay, most did so in ways that unequivocally cast the region as the antithesis of black progress. Jean Toomer's four poems and sketches in that volume, excerpted from the author's 1923

---

6 Tuskegee was a pioneer of black rural club organization and extension work (alumnus Thomas Monroe Campbell headed the first Cooperative Extension Program in the country). By the 1920s, Tuskegee was joined by numerous other black agricultural schools; rural clubs; philanthropic organizations such as the Rosenwald, Slater, and Jeannes Foundations; and the U.S. Government (which established large rural extension programs to boost agricultural production during World War I). T. M. Campbell, The Movable School Goes to the Negro Farmer (Tuskegee, AL: Tuskegee Institute P, 1936). By 1918, there were 268 women employed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to teach domestic science to black women in the South, and most of those agents stayed on after the armistice and continued to work with rural black communities. Marilyn Irvin Holt, Linoleum, Better Babies, and the Modern Farm Woman, 1890-1930 (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1995): 74-5.

book Cane, certainly presented rural Georgia as a place of the past.[7] A characteristic example is the third stanza of Toomer's poem "Song of the Son," which read like an elegy to black rural life:

> In time, although the sun is setting on
> A song-lit race of slaves, it has not set;
> Though late, O soil, it is not too late yet
> To catch thy plaintive soul, leaving, soon gone,
> Leaving, to catch thy plaintive soul soon gone.

The urban speaker's self-appointed task in "Song of the Son" was to record the soul of the rural black South, embodied in the "song-lit race of slaves" who worked the soil and upon whom the sun was literally (and metaphorically) setting. Toomer's choice of the word "slaves" to describe 1920s black agricultural workers conjured up images of unyielding white control and black subservience—images consistent with how the South was widely perceived from the 1870s (after Reconstruction) until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.[8] Georgia had the largest black population of any state in the country in 1920, and most of it was rural.[9] Dominated by cotton monoculture and large plantations controlled by wealthy whites, Georgia also had the lowest levels of black

---

7 The New Negro reprinted the prose pieces "Carma" and "Fern" from Cane, and also two poems: "Georgia Dusk" and "Song of the Son." Images of pine trees and dusk linked "Song of the Son" to Toomer's preceding poem, "Georgia Dusk," and both poems were connected via setting to Toomer's two short stories in the volume.

8 Mark Schultz, The Rural Face of White Supremacy (Champaign, IL: U of Illinois P, 2007): 4-5.

9 The U.S. Bureau of the Census publication Negroes in the United States, 1920-1932 measured the Negro population of Georgia in 1920 as 1,206,365; the total Negro population in the United States that year was 10,463,131 (of that number, 6,903,658 African Americans were categorized as rural).The center of the Negro Population for 1920 was identified as 1.8 miles north-northeast of Fawn Rising, Georgia. Monroe Work, Negro Year Book: An Annual Encyclopedia of the Negro, 1925-26. (Tuskegee, AL: The Negro Year Book Publishing Company, Tuskegee Institute, 1925): 432, 441.

landownership in the South.[10] Although his 1901 survey of black agriculture in Georgia was optimistic about future capital and land acquisitions by black farmers, in 1903, when W.E.B. DuBois described his train trip into rural Georgia in the Souls of Black Folk, he warned his readers about racism and limitations:

> If you wish to ride with me you must come into the "Jim Crow Car."....Of course this car is not so good as the other, but it is fairly clean and comfortable. The discomfort lies chiefly in the hearts of those four black men yonder—and in mine.[11]

That latter assessment proved the more pervasive, and Georgia in the early 1920s was generally assumed to be firmly in the grip of Jim Crow—not a viable place for black farmers to make a future. Read within the context of the New Negro anthology, Toomer's creative pieces reinforced notions of rural Georgia as the "Solid South"— a region characterized by absolute and unchallengable white supremacy, "systematic segregation, universal black disfranchisement, and ritualized public lynching."[12] But Toomer's 1923

---

10 Schultz, 45-6.

11 W. E. B. DuBois, "The Negro Landholder of Georgia," Bulletin of the Department of Labor, Vol. I, No. 350 (July, 1901): 681. And W. E. B. DuBois, Chapter VII "Of the Black Belt" in Souls of Black Folk. Three Negro Classics (New York: Avon Books, 1965): 286. Barbara Foley noted that the latter text was formative for Cane, and argued that Toomer's use of songs was a clear echo of the sorrow songs DuBois depicted in Souls. Barbara Foley, "In The Land of Cotton: Economics and Violence in Jean Toomer's Cane," African American Review, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Summer 1998): 196.

12 Schultz, 5. Joel Williamson described the "solid South" as an historically contingent myth many years in the making: "The white South in the 1920s and the 1930s became, in both its mind and body, what it had been seeking to be since the 1830s, a relatively solid, unitary, most-together place. It was precisely this fact that made it possible for Wilbur Cash, who had been born in 1900 and matured in the 1920s to write such a book as The Mind of the South (1941)....The profound fissures that had existed in the South before those years—between black and white, between the slaveholding elite and the non-slaveholding mass and, subsequently, the social heirs of each, Conservative Democrats and Radical Populists, between racial Conservatives and racial Radicals, and between men and women—were not dissolved, but they were covered over by a heavy plastering of myth, troweled smoothly on by an elite determined to make it seem that

book Cane presented a more complex picture of black rural life, and provided an interesting (if unintentional) counterpoint to the dominant representations of the proverbial "land of cotton."

Toomer is an artist identified then and now as a central figure in the New Negro movement; his book Cane is the one literary work consistently claimed both as "modernist" and also as "Harlem Renaissance" or "New Negro." The young writer was also one of many period artists who had complicated ties to blackness and rural space, which he in part conflated. Viewing rural blacks as both inspiring and other, Toomer felt animated by his "Negro blood" but grew increasingly uncomfortable with being identified as African American. He drew inspiration for his book Cane from two trips South, including a pivotal time spent on staff at a black agricultural college in Sparta, Georgia. And yet despite the generative power of rural spaces, Toomer couldn't wait to be back in cities, felt that his hometown of Washington, D.C. was too provincial and stifling, and took every opportunity to be in New York, where he thought the literary and cultural action was. As Charles Scruggs and Lee Vandemarr aptly put it, "Jean Toomer liked cities—their textures, their special geographies, their capacity to stimulate the emotions and the intellect. He called New York "one of the few liveable places on earth."[13]

In this chapter, I argue that the schism between Jean Toomer's personal and published writings can be usefully analogized to a contemporaneous schism in anthropological writing. Building on the work of Johannes Fabian, I propose that

---

there were no cracks in the structure that was their world and never really had been." Joel Williamson, The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South since Emancipation (New York: Oxford UP, 1984): 459.

13 Charles Scruggs and Lee Vandemarr, Jean Toomer and the Terrors of American History. (Philadeliphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1998): 159.

temporality and temporal shifts in Cane animate the book's rural terrain, putting it on equal footing with the urban spaces that Toomer also depicted. Although such literary modernist techniques are most often discussed in terms of the ways they marginalize their black subjects, Toomer (perhaps unwittingly) deployed modernist techniques in a way that created space for a rural New Negro subjectivity. That is, he created fictional spaces in which black rurals were multifacted individuals living in the modern world, possessed of agency and capable of initiative, action, and intention. The rural characters in Cane are not merely debased symbols of racial oppression, or passive foils whose main utility lies in showing the ways the world acts on them. The latter half of this chapter details the numerous discrepancies between the real-life Sparta and Toomer's fictionalized Sempter in Cane in order to prove that the fear and shock depicted was not simply the shock of a northern African American experiencing the Jim Crow South (as is typically argued), but was also the shock of an urbanite confronting the rural. In Toomer's case, his influential family contacts enabled him to gain a short-term teaching position in rural Georgia. But once there, he had to contend with the intensely personal nature of southern rural race relations—a far cry from the comparatively straight-forward Jim Crow segregation of the urban South, and an even more dramatic shift from the affluent integrated neighborhood in Washington, D. C. where the young writer grew up.[14] My larger argument is that one

14 Mark Smith, in How Race Is Made, argued that sensory history played a defining role in the emergence of binary notions of racial identity in the American South—notions that originated during slavery and became increasingly important under post-bellum segregation, when the "number of visually ambiguous 'black' people increased [due to miscegenation]..., and sight became ever less reliable as an authenticator of racial identity." Whereas both his own light skin color, and his family's wealth and prestige, afforded Toomer a relatively high degree of social mobility and access in the North, such visual and class distinctions were largely meaningless in the South, where the "belief that blacks as a group smelled, that they sounded a particular way, that their skin felt different...and that there was much to be feared from touching and tasting blackness—all these sensory constructions muted class distinctions under

of the best and most interesting features of Toomer's American South in Cane is the myriad ways the work spills out of its neat frameworks and undermines its own stereotypical accounts of racial violence and black rural identity.

TURNING SOUTH

Toomer was one of many people in the interwar period who had difficulty believing in the existence of rural black moderns. As Robert Moton's essay in The New Negro suggested, in the 1920s, black agricultural schools were key sites where rural black modernity was clearly articulated and put into widespread practice as a guiding educational philosophy. But Toomer was unmoved by this particular vision of progress and modernity—even when confronted by it firsthand. The following quote from The Wayward and the Seeking, a posthumously published collection of Toomer's writings, is one of Toomer's recollections of the time he spent teaching at the Sparta Agricultural and Industrial School in Georgia:

> A family of back country Negroes had only recently moved into a shack not too far away. They sang. And this was the first time I'd ever heard the folk-songs and spirituals. They were very rich and sad and joyous and beautiful. But I learned that the Negroes of the town objected to them. They called them 'shouting.' They had victrolas and player-pianos. So, I realized with deep regret, that the spirituals, meeting ridicule, would be certain to die out. With Negroes also the trend was toward the small town and then towards the city—industry and commerce and machines. The folk spirit was walking in to die on the modern desert.[15]

---

southern segregation in the first half of the twentieth century." Mark M. Smith, How Race is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2006): 7-8.

15 Jean Toomer, quoted in Darwin Turner, ed. The Wayward and the Seeking (Washington, D.C.: Howard UP, 1980): 123.

One of Toomer's long-term projects was writing an autobiography, and he drafted several extended versions from the late 1920s into the 1940s.[16] Toomer was an unreliable autobiographer, known to consistently romanticize and revise accounts of his life. But the above quote about his impressions of the rural South is largely consistent with the sentiments he was expressing in the early 1920s while he was writing Cane. Toomer went to Sparta, Georgia, and later to Spartanburg, South Carolina, and he saw rural antimoderns—a people whose culture would soon be fundamentally changed or eradicated by contact with "modern" life, which Toomer identified as urban, industrial, commercial, and dominated by machines.

Upon completion of his book Cane in December of 1922, Toomer wrote to his close friend and fellow author Waldo Frank:

> The book is done. From three angles, CANE'S design is a circle. Aesthetically, from simple forms to complex ones, and back to simple forms. Regionally, from the South up into the North, and back into the South again. Or, from the North down into the South, and then a return North.[17]

Toomer's refusal to clarify the relative positions of North and South (or, rather, his insistence on multiple readings of the positions both places occupy in his book) illustrates the quandary many critics have found themselves in when trying to make sense of the pivotal trips South that influenced Cane during the work's formative stages. In her 2005

---

16 Scruggs and Vandemarr, 9.

17 Scruggs and Vandemarr, 101. The most cogent argument about Toomer's own view of the sections in Cane as a heterogeneous collection of pieces (rather than a single narrative) was written by a Yale undergraduate, David Suwondo, for an English course taught by Jessica Pressmam. See Suwondo, "Cane: an American Mosaic," (Yale University: April 2, 2010). Digitally archived at "African American Studies at Beinecke Library: Student Research in Beinicke Collections." Accessed 12/3/2010. <http://beineckejwj.wordpress.com/2010/06/02/student-research-suwondo/>

book Split-Gut Song: Jean Toomer and the Poetics of Modernity, Karen Jackson Ford commented:

> Toomer's inconsistent portrayal of the book as both angular and circular, indeed as angles that somehow sketch a circle, captures his urge to form a whole out of disparate parts—to forge those angles (South, North; rural, urban; simple, complex) into a circle through the architectonics of the volume. Yet the oppositions that make up the lines of his 'angles' remain resistant to resolution.[18]

Toomer insisted on the multiple meanings of his book. While it might literally start in the South with the first sketch "Karintha," its "spiritual" beginning is alternately identified by Toomer as the sketch "Bona and Paul" (set in Chicago), and as biographical—the two months Toomer spent in 1921, working as acting principal of the Sparta Agricultural and Industrial Institute in Georgia.[19] From this all-black school specializing in vocational education, Toomer wrote an excited letter to Alain Locke declaring on November 8th that, "I've learned a lot. Especially from an economic, sociological standpoint. 99% of the people who write and talk about the Negro hardly know his name. Artistically, the field is virgin."[20] Again to Locke on November 24th, Toomer wrote that he was returning North to write the book, and "of course I have material."[21] On Toomer's return to Washington, D.C. he did in fact begin the pieces that became the book Cane, a beginning that was personally significant given the difficulties Toomer previously experienced trying to write. Although these poems and narrative sketches went through numerous revisions and reorganizations before being published in 1923, and although Toomer's comfort level

---

18 Karen Jackson Ford, Split-Gut Song: Jean Toomer and the Poetics of Modernism (Tuscaloosa, AL: The U of Alabama P, 2005): 5.

19 Mark Whalan, ed. The Letters of Jean Toomer, 1919-1924 (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2006): 101.

20 Whalan, 27.

21 Whalan, 28.

with being identified with African American material changed substantially during his lifetime, he “never tired of romanticizing the deep emotional impact of being exposed to a rural black community in the South for the first time."[22]

Toomer was so affected by his time in Sparta that he insisted on making another trip South during the writing of Cane, this time accompanied by the well-known white modernist writer Waldo Frank. The urgency of the trip was based on Toomer's assessment of the creative needs of both writers. The South was a key point of early inspiration for Cane, and the place where Toomer first encountered the rigid constraints of southern racial politics.[23] Leaving Washington, D.C. and going South again would provide a boost to help him start his next major writing project. Toomer wrote to Frank in July of 1922:

> Your letters, together with a bit of analysis on my part, have convinced me that the impulse which sprang from Sparta, Georgia last fall has just about fulfilled and spent itself. My book, whether it matures next month or next year, will place a period. A fresh, and I hope a deeper start will come from our coming venture.[24]

Toomer also saw the trip as an opportunity for Frank to educate himself on Negro life. The two writers had discussed Frank's failure to write about African Americans in his 1922 book Our America, and Frank had attributed this omission to his ignorance of African American culture. Toomer was determined to remedy this ignorance. So when Frank suggested a trip South to gather material on African American life so he could amend Our America, Toomer jumped at the suggestion.[25]

---

22 Whalan, xxvii.

23 Whalan, xxvii.

24 Whalan, 49.

25 Whalan, 50.

Although Frank decided instead to use the trip to focus on writing a new novel, Holiday, Toomer was undeterred about the trip's importance. The debate was not over whether the two would go South together, but rather focused on what destination was adequately southern. In July of 1922, responding to several potential destinations suggested by Toomer, Frank wrote:

> Here is my need, Jean, as regards town. My novel is to be called HOLIDAY. And it is simply the story of a lynching. The picture of the drab hideous unpainted town of the whites, the niggertown next-door, possibly in a marshy pinewood....Now what I want, just incidentally, is to be once again in such a town..where there are such white persons, and such black ones. Is Kentucky the place? Is it sufficiently south? What about one of the Carolinas? They are not so far as Georgia, and are the precise thing.[26]

In August, after South Carolina had been settled on as the destination, Toomer corresponded with southern acquaintances to make arrangements for the trip. He wrote to see if Frank was interested in visiting a black church. The other live issue, whether they would travel as white or black, was decided for them by Toomer's brief vacation to Harper's Ferry, West Virginia, where he got quite tan doing outdoor sports:

> One phase of the trip which I have thus far said nothing about, I think best to mention now. At whatever town we stay, I'll have to be known as Negro. First, because only by experiencing white pressure can the venture bear its fullest fruit for me. Second, because the color of my skin (it is nearly black from sun) at the present time makes such a course a physical necessity.[27]

Frank's response to Toomer's temporarily darkened skin was a decision to himself "pass" as a Negro during the trip:

> If you go as Negro, cant I also? What is Negro? Doubtless, if the Southerner could see in my heart my feeling for 'the negro,' my love of his great qualities, my profound sympathy for his trial and respect for the great way he bears them, that

---

26 Whalan, 50.

27 Whalan, 63.

> southerner would say 'why youre worse than a nigger'...so if you go as Negro, so go I.[28]

As these excerpts from Toomer's correspondence reveal, race was for him in many ways a complex and mutable category. He and Waldo Frank could casually change their racial identifications depending on context and circumstance. Yet at the same time, in Toomer's view there was such a thing as a "real" black experience: it was southern and rural and lower-class (or "peasant"). And it was valuable—he and Frank would travel hundreds of miles to experience and be inspired by it. Although Toomer was attentive to and interested in the social and racial gradations offered by the South, his primary aim was to view at close hand a kind of authentic blackness he felt was absent from northern cities.

Although unappealing from a contemporary perspective because of the way it distances its author and infantilizes his subjects, Toomer's primitivist vision of rural blacks was very much in line with the guiding aesthetic sensibilities of many modernist writers in the 1920s. As Michael North wrote in his Preface to The Dialect of Modernism,

> [t]hat the modern covets the primitive—perhaps even created it—is another frequently acknowledged fact....The real attraction of the black voice to writers like Stein and Eliot was its technical distinction, its insurrectionary opposition to the known and familiar in language. For them the author occupied the role of the racial outsider because he or she spoke a language opposed to the standard. Modernism, that is to say, mimicked the strategies of dialect and aspired to become a dialect itself.

North posited that Toomer faced unique challenges when using modernist approaches to his source material, challenges that were both personal and formal. His early literary experiments had lasting personal consequences. In his chapter "William Carlos Williams and Jean Toomer," North documented Toomer's ambivalent response to praise from the

---

28 Whalan, 63.

avant-garde when he realized that old-fashioned racial dichotomies were being applied to both himself and his work:

> The enthusiasm of Anderson and Frank could easily edge off into the condescension shown by the Dial's brisk, dismissive review of Cane, which stressed the accuracy of the author's "negro ear." Toomer was also praised in the New York Tribune for having rendered "the hopes and fears of the genuine darky," an entity whose passions, according to the Boston Evening Transcript, are "untutored and entirely unconnected with the brain.[29]

The stakes of representing blackness were different for Toomer than they were for Anglo modernists, for whom linguistic mimicry and racial masquerade were temporary artistic strategies. Try as he might, after the publication of Cane, Toomer could never fully step away from the label of "Negro," a racial category he came to find offensive and reductive.[30]

The formal challenge with which Toomer wrestled in the early 1920s was how to create cultural coherence using aesthetic fragmentation. According to North, Toomer's poems, particularly those in the first section of Cane, were unsuccessful in achieving these ends.[31] North's contention is that the poem "Reapers," the second piece in the book,

---

29 Michael North, The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature (New York: Oxford UP, 1994): 164-5.

30 George Hutchinson's "Jean Toomer and American Racial Discourse" and Jon Woodson's To Make a New Race: Gurdjieff, Toomer, and the Harlem Renaissance offer the most thorough scholarly treatments of Toomer's shifting ideas about racial identity. Hutchinson noted, "In a preface to one of his unpublished authobiographies—appropriately called Book X—Toomer regrets that he will have to resort to conventional and distorting terms to get his racial message across, as our very language allows no other means of expressing his sense of identity; he has considered the problem for years and cannot find any adequate solution. 'If I have to say 'colored,' 'white,' 'jew,' 'gentile,' and so forth, I will unwittingly do my bit toward reinforcing the limited views of mankind which dismember mankind into mutually repellant factions.'" George Hutchinson, "Jean Toomer and American Racial Discourse," Texas Studies in Literature and Language, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Summer 1993): 231.

31 North, 172.

represents a fulcrum in Cane—a key point of modernist experimentation and negotiation, and "a major change in the life of this rural area, the change from manpower to machines, which changes everything else as well."[32] He argues that the figure of the machine (the mower) changes, modernizes, and irreparably ruptures rural space. The rhymed quatrains, complete and conventional sentences, and largely consistent iambic rhythm stands for "the repetitive nature of the work," the swinging of the scythes; the death of the field rat marks a "change in meaning and in sound."[33] North writes, "[t]he dying squeal of the rat in line six affects the poetry itself, which is least iambic and most interrupted just here, as if the line itself were cut mindlessly and inorganically."[34]

Reapers
Black reapers with the sound of steel on stones
Are sharpening scythes. I see them place the hones
In their hip-pockets as a thing that's done,
And start their silent swinging, one by one.
Black horses drive a mower through the weeds,
And there, a field rat, startled, squealing bleeds.
His belly close to ground. I see the blade,
Blood-stained, continue cutting weeds and shade.[35]

North's reading is elegant, responding both to the nuances of the poem, and to the sentiment expressed by Toomer in a letter to Waldo Frank: "The supreme fact of mechanical civilization is that you become part of it, or get sloughed off (under)."[36] But the temporal narrative implicit in the analysis is problematic: "This sort of work is repetitive in a physical sense, relying as it does on a few movements reiterated again and

32 North, 172.

33 North, 172.

34 North, 173.

35 Jean Toomer, Cane (New York: Liveright, 1975): 3.

36 Whalan, 172.

again, and in a temporal sense, since it must be done every day, every season, season after season."[37]

First is the literal problem—reaping, gathering a crop by cutting it, is a seasonal activity rather than a daily one. It is repetitive, but harvest seasons end, and are then followed by other varied types of farm work: plowing, planting, chopping weeds, waiting for rain, etc. As Sparta area resident James Wilson asserted in a 1995 oral history interview, even sharecropping—which is traditionally considered basic farm work—was skilled labor that required the mastery of a plethora of different skills in the 1920s and '30s: "If you didn't know what you were doing, you were a lost ball in the weeds," Wilson summarized.[38] Second is the contextual problem; historically speaking, Toomer could not have picked a worse location to exemplify the impending threat of mechanization to agricultural workers.[39] Landowners in Hancock County might be persuaded that fertilizer was necessary to increase crop yields and quality, but in 1921, making the large capital investments necessary to mechanize cotton production was beyond most of their means. Additionally, unlike the planters of the Mississippi Delta, landlords in the Sparta area were disinclined to turn to modern machinery to solve their big agricultural problems: low crop yields, low cotton prices, and the high cost of

---

37 North, 172.

38 Schultz, 30-31, xii. Most of Schultz's informants began their first-person oral histories in the 1920s.

39 Although most critics treat Cane as a primarily lyrical and mystical text, Barbara Foley noted that "[w]hile many Toomer scholars stress Cane's efforts - successful or unsuccessful - to transcend concrete historicity, a number read the book as an intense engagement with the actualities of 1920s Georgia life." Barbara Foley, "In The Land of Cotton: Economics and Violence in Jean Toomer's Cane," African American Review, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Summer 1998): 1. Among the critics that take Toomer's historical engagement seriously are Foley, Arthur P. Davis, Nellie McKay, Nathaniel Mackey, Lucinda MacKethan, Wahneema Lubiano, and Trudier Harris.

transportation for fertilizer coming into the community and bales of cotton going out.[40] Most local folks considered manpower and mules good enough to get the work done, and some of those who did not chose to move rather than to fight the battle over mechanization with their more conservative relatives.[41] Although the local newspaper, the Sparta Ishmaelite, advertised tractors as early as 1910, very few farmers in the county bought the machines (there were only 35 tractors in the county in 1925, and that number declined over the next two decades). Only one interviewee of 180 in Mark Schultz's local study of twentieth-century race relations remembered any tenants being pushed off their farms because their landlords mechanized.[42]

The scythes in the first half of "Reapers" are hand-held tools, and the mower in the second half is a horse-drawn apparatus. Unlike a modern combine, a horse-drawn mower would only be able to cut vegetation of very limited height (typically, not much higher than the top of the blades), which may explain the presence of the black fieldworkers in the poem. Scythes are long, curved knives used to cut through tall

---

40 Unbeknownst to the young author, Jean Toomer's own extended family in Hancock County (beginning with the wealthy planter David Dickson) made the majority of their post-Civil-War fortune selling fertilizer and using new scientific principles of labor management to farm on marginal land. Kent Anderson Leslie, Woman of Color, Daughter of Privilege: Amanda America Dickson, 1849-1893 (Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 1995): 48-9, 60-62. After the boll weevil infestation, many land owners in the country shifted from cotton cultivation to logging, which was a more reliable source of income.

41 Historian Mark Schultz noted that "[t]he possibility of mechanization created a generational split in some families. David Harper remembered an impasse when he asked his landowning father to get a tractor. 'He didn't want to. And I didn't want to plow mules.' So David left for the North." Although a few black farming families joined what Schultz termed "Hancock's small, unenthusiastic movement toward mechanization," most continued to use the traditional labor-intensive system of cultivation. One farmer, Calvin Travis, continued to use mules until 1960. Schultz, 220.

42 Mamie Washington was the one informant to remember any tenants in the county being evicted for this reason, and even she stressed that such evictions never happened with her own tenants. Schultz, 220.

vegetation such as grass, either to harvest it or to clear an overgrown area for another use. In this case, the order (reapers then mower) and parallel structure of the poem suggests that the black workers are either manually cutting the tall plants to a height that is manageable for the mowing machine (which literally follows them), or opening up the field—cutting a first swath of grass to allow the mechanical mower into the field to complete the work.[43] In either case, their labor is necessary precisely because of the limits of the agricultural machinery being used.[44] The people work in tandem with the machine, which is itself pulled by farm animals. The threat here is not human replacement by machines, but rather the empty harvest: both the mower and the workers are cutting weeds. The poem's title "Reapers" suggests a crop, and then delivers instead a field full of nuisance plants and a dead rat.

A related, and, to my mind, more serious problem in North's reading is the idea about the uninterrupted, unchanging time in which black farming in Cane was taking place. My contention is that the temporal breaks in Cane work in the direction opposite to that suggested by North, and actually undermine Toomer's own convictions about a rural space existing "out of time" and outside of modernity. To make sense of Toomer's temporal breaks, it is helpful to look at how 1920s anthropologists negotiated time in their field's different written genres because their work was similarly fraught with temporal contradictions. Johannes Fabian, in his influential 1983 book Time and the Other, argued that the majority of published anthropological research was written in a

43 This was necessary because many early mowers (either horse- or tractor-drawn) were attached on the side, and could not mow directly in front of themselves; scythes remained essential agricultural tools long after mowing mechanization because of this design flaw.

44 Only if the black horses are taken to be symbols of mechanical horsepower, rather than literal figures in the poem, can North's reading of the mower as a symbol of modern mechanization make sense.

manner that temporally distanced the people it studied. Most anthropological narratives, according to Fabian, effectively denied coevalness (the sharing of time, space, and experience) between the ethnographer and the hosts. Fabian's contention is that much anthropological rhetoric derived from the 19th century evolutionary frame of thought, a frame that spatializes time. In the evolutionary perspective, some groups of people are closer to others, while some are further away. The "primitive" is one resulting temporalizing concept, which, when deployed, conceptually separates people who do in fact exist in the same historical time and space.[45]

One important thing Fabian noted in his study of temporalizing rhetoric was its occasional absence, particularly in the fieldnotes of anthropologists:

> The most interesting finding, however, was one that precludes a simple, overall indictment of our discipline. This was the discovery of an aporetic split between recognition of coevalness in some ethnographic research and denial of coevalness in most anthropological theorizing and writing.[46]

---

45 Eric Wolf explored this idea of racialized temporal distance in Europe and the People Without History in 1982, and argued that "[i]f social and cultural distinctiveness and mutual separation were a hallmark of humankind, one would expect to find it most easily among the so-called primitives, people "without a history, supposedly isolated from the external world and from one another." Yet because "there are connections everywhere," acting as though the boundaries of nation states are inevitably dispositive creates a welter of problems in our understanding of mutual encounter and confrontation. One result of this isolationist mode of thinking was a model of modernization that required cities (one extreme manifestation of which was the "theory of 'forced draft urbanization' (Huntington 1968: 655), which held that the Vietnamese could be propelled toward modernization by driving them into the cities through aerial bombardment and defoliation of the countryside"). Eric Wolf, Europe and the People Without History (Berkeley: U of California P, 1982): 4-7.

46 Johannes Fabian, Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object (New York: Columbia UP, 2002): 35.

This discursive split is interesting because it seems to mirror a discontinuity in temporal markers between Jean Toomer's published and unpublished writings. Toomer's letters and autobiographical writings paint a picture in which black southern rurals exist in a different and distant time from that of modern urban society, in a state threatened by contact with modern life and objects. In contrast, the rural African American characters in Cane exist in a multitude of times—so many, in fact, that it is impossible to locate them with any kind of precision.[47] They are not solidly in the present, but nor are they relegated to some remote or "primitive" past. Some examples, the first from an autobiography (quoted earlier), and the second an extended quotation from the opening sketch in Cane, highlight this important distinction:

> A family of back country Negroes had only recently moved into a shack not too far away. They sang. And this was the first time I'd ever heard the folk-songs and spirituals. They were very rich and sad and joyous and beautiful. But I learned that the Negroes of the town objected to them. They called them 'shouting.' They had victrolas and player-pianos. So, I realized with deep regret, that the spirituals, meeting ridicule, would be certain to die out. With Negroes also the trend was toward the small town and then towards the city—industry and commerce and machines. The folk spirit was walking in to die on the modern desert.[48]

> Karintha is a woman. Young men run stills to make her money. Young men go to the big cities and run on the road. Young men go away to college. They all want to bring her money. These are the young men who thought that all they had

---

47 William Ramsey noted, "[i]n effect, Cane presents two Souths. One is a temporal South of disturbing historical oppression and despairing lack of progress. The other is what could be called Toomer's transcendent or "eternal South," existing above time and social particulars....it is the playing off of one South against the other that makes Cane so hard to define and so unique to encounter." William M. Ramsey, "Jean Toomer's Eternal South." Southern Literary Journal 36.1 (Fall, 2003): 76. While I disagree with Ramsey's argument that the temporal conflict in Cane is binary (i.e. between the present and the timeless), I agree with his assessment of the disorienting effects of temporal shifts within the work.

48 Toomer, Wayward, 123.

> to do was to count time. But Karintha is a woman, and she has had a child. A child fell out of her womb onto a bed of pine-needles in the forest. Pine-needles are smooth and sweet. They are elastic to the feet of rabbits….A sawmill was nearby. Its pyramidal sawdust pile smouldered. It is a year before one completely burns. Meanwhile, the smoke curls up and hangs in odd wraiths about the trees, curls up, and spreads itself out over the valley….Weeks after Karintha returned home the smoke was so heavy you tasted it in the water. Some one made up a song:
>
> Smoke is on the hills. Rise up.
> Smoke is on the hills, O rise
> And take my soul to Jesus.[49]

The first autobiographical quote affirms the idea of an "ethnographic present," defined as the period of time before a culture experiences extensive outside contact. According to Fabian, the frame of the ethnographic present accomplishes the spatialization of time; it draws a boundary by positing that two groups have distinct and different experiences of time even when they are literally in the same time and place.

The second quote, from Cane, is much more complex. Sentences one through five are in the present tense ("Karintha is"; "Young men run" ; "Young men go" etc.), until the word "thought" in the sixth sentence pulls the reader into awareness of a past. The next sentence moves from present to past, and is additionally complex because it uses "has" plus the participle of the verb "to have": "But Karintha is a woman, and she has had a child." In English, the complex verb form of the present perfect tense conveys that a completed action still affects the present. It creates interconnected time frames and relationships with the events in the past. As the sketch quickly moves from past to present, and then briefly to the future, it conveys the complexity of relationships between all those time frames: past, present, and future. In the past, "a child fell" into the pine needles of a forest; in the present, those pine needles are "smooth and sweet" and "elastic" to other live creatures on them: rabbits. A sawmill (used for harvesting cut trees

---

49 Toomer, Cane, 2.

such as pines) "was nearby" and its sawdust pile "smouldered." But then the past tense "smouldered" becomes even more complicated: we learn that this burning goes on for a year. And then we readers are suddenly aware of an intermediate time during the burn, the "[m]eanwhile" during which smoke "curls" and "hangs" and "spreads" over the forest and the rest of the landscape. And of course this complex web of past, present, and future relates to Karintha, the explicit subject of the sketch: "Weeks after Karintha returned home the smoke was so heavy you tasted it in the water." Some unidentified, unnamed person in the story connects these events to Biblical time through a song, analogizing the perpetual smoke from the sawmill blaze with the divine fire of the Christian Messiah come to destroy the world after the End of Days: "Smoke is on the hills. Rise up. / Smoke is on the hills, O rise/ And take my soul to Jesus." Time yields to apocalypse, eschatological time, a vision of the end of time itself.

These radical temporal shifts disrupt the narrative of a "distant" rural past. This rural past is not distant and primitive—it is past, present, and future. And it imagines a new experience of time: the end of time itself. It is evasive, disorienting, and hard to pinpoint. In other words, it is thoroughly modern in many of the ways in which Baudelaire characterized that state in his seminal 1863 essay "The Painter of Modern Life":

> [T]he lover of universal life moves into the crowds as though into an enormous reservoir of electricity. He, the lover of life, may also be compared to a mirror as vast as this crowd: to a kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness, which with every one of its movements presents a pattern of life, in all its multiplicity, and the flowing grace of all the elements that go to compose life. It is an ego athirst for the non-ego, and reflecting it at every moment in energies more vivid than life itself, always inconstant and fleeting.[50]

---

50 Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863). In P. E. Charvet, trans. Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Literature (New York: Viking, 1972): 395-422.

Baudelaire, often described as the first modernist, presents a view of modern life that is deeply sensory, self-conscious, and characterized by relentless (and perhaps disorienting) change. But there was also a second picture of modernity that was important in rural America in the 1920s. This second picture was more abstract and conceptual, and centered on Jürgen Habermas' gloss of Hegel's definition of modernity as the dream of the Enlightenment—the dream of infinite progress made possible by study and application of knowledge: "Modernity can and will no longer borrow the criteria by which it takes its orientation from the models supplied by another epoch..."[51] Hegel, considered by many to be the first philosopher to develop a clear concept of modernity because he noted "the relationship between modernity and rationality," questioned the Enlightenment's faith in its brand of reason and rationality, but noted also that its adherents were as zealous about human perfectibility and progress attained through rationality as those in the previous epoch were to the idea of Christian perfection attained through grace and faith.[52]

There is, of course, some irony in the fact that Hegel's formulation of modernity could be liberating for twentieth century rural African Americans because, as Susan Buck-Morss so aptly put it, "Hegel's philosophy of history has provided for two centuries a justification for the most complacent forms of Eurocentrism."[53] But as Buck-Morss herself has so aptly demonstrated, the philosopher's representations of black people engaged in freedom struggles changed dramatically across his career. Hegel's 1806 Phenomenology of Mind was profoundly influenced by both the Haitian revolution and

---

51 Jürgen Habermas, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures (Cambridge, MA: The MIT P, 1990): 7.

52 Habermas, 4-25.

53 Susan Buck-Morss, "Hegel and Haiti." Critical Inquiry 26.4 (Summer 2000): 864.

Adam Smith's recent book, The Wealth of Nations, and made the radical shift from a discussion of human freedom in abstract terms of exchange and property to a historically-informed discussion of slavery and labor. In the early 1800s, Hegel saw the slave revolt in Haiti as the decisive break from the past, and, as a result, shifted the philosophical discussion of economic systems to a discussion of politics that posited African slaves as self-conscious agents with the power (indeed, the natural human mandate) to challenge both their immediate oppression and the racist laws on which it was predicated.[54] Paul Gilroy noted the importance of Hegel's early work in his seminal study of black modernity:

> My own interest in the famous section at the start of Hegel's The Phenomenology of Mind is twofold: First, it can be used to initiate an analysis of modernity which is abjured by Habermas because it points directly to an approach which sees the intimate association of modernity and slavery as a fundamental issue. This is significant because...it provides an opportunity to re-periodise and reaccentuate accounts of the dialectic of Enlightenment which have not always been concerned to look at modernity through the lens of colonialism or scientific racism. Second, a return to Hegel's account of the conflict and the forms of dependency produced in the relationship between master and slave foregrounds the issues of brutality and terror which are too frequently ignored.[55]

Noting that numerous intellectuals formed by the black Atlantic (a transnational cultural space created by the Atlantic slave trade and its resulting diasporic formations) have engaged Hegel's ideas, Gilroy aptly sums up the critical situation: "the appropriation of Hegelian themes is by no means always negative."[56]

The two different visions of the modern—the experience of radical and continuous change, disorientation, and disruption; and the belief that applied learning

---

54 Buck-Morss, 844-8.

55 Paul Gilroy, The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000): 53-4.

56 Gilroy, 54.

would produce infinite progress in a world beset by racist brutality—both existed in rural America in between the World Wars. And both decisively shaped 1920s black modernity. Consider Robert Moton's description in the 1925 anthology The New Negro of the near-religious zeal with which rural agricultural education is received:

> These institutions have maintained specific agencies for reaching out into the body of the Negro race—farmers' conferences, educational tours, extension departments in all of their ramifications, are an essential part of the work of Hampton and Tuskegee. While the boys and girls were being taught in the class-rooms, the fathers and mothers were being reached in the field and in the home; education was carried to them in simple direct terms made plain by demonstrations, with witnesses to testify how the plan had worked with them. The effect was as inspiring as a revival.[57]

Compare Moton's vision of faith in the improving and uplifting possibilities of modern farming techniques to Toomer's Baudelarian descriptions in "Bona and Paul," the piece he repeatedly identified as the spiritual heart of Cane:

> The boulevard is sleek in asphalt, and, with arc-lights and limousines, aglow. Dry leaves scamper behind the whir of cars. The scent of exploded gasoline that mingles with them is faintly sweet. Mellow stone mansions overshadow clapboard homes which now resemble Negro shanties in some southern alley. Bona and Paul, and Art and Helen, move along an island-like, far-stretching strip of leaf-soft ground. Above them, worlds of shadow-planes and solids, silently moving.[58]

It has been easier for scholars to identify the modern impulse in this latter piece by Toomer than it has been to see the radical social change implicit in writing by Moton and many other 1920s rural reformers, which tends to lack the aesthetic hallmarks of fragmentation and rapid and radical change. Unfortunately, the modern has subsequently come to be so closely associated with cities and urbanization that, to signal the modern, many people simply evoke rural America as an assumed foil or counterpoint. Yet it is

---

57 Locke, 326.

58 Toomer, Cane, 73-4.

essential to be aware of these different and sometimes competing definitions of modernity in order for the radical changes in rural life in the 1920s to make sense.

THE WORST OF TIMES

Times in Sparta, Georgia were changing radically, and Jean Toomer was an eyewitness to the most important twentieth-century catalyst in that rural community's transformation. The dramatic changes in Hancock County were not the direct result of mechanization, modernization, or urbanization. Rather, the main culprit was ecological: the arrival of the boll weevil in 1921. Had the weevil infestation happened earlier or later in the crop cycle, the cotton plants would have been less vulnerable. As it was, much of Hancock County's cotton crop was destroyed in several months, and half of the wealth in the county disappeared.[59] Cotton gins closed down, farmers and businesspeople went bankrupt, several Sparta banks failed, and acres and acres of farmland were abandoned—left to grow back into pine forest.[60] With no way to support their families, many sharecroppers and farm laborers left the community to find work in cities. Some moved permanently; others sent money home, and planned to return when the local cotton economy recovered. Mary Hunt was 14 years old in 1921 when her father left home, found summer work building the New York City Subway, and sent money home so his family could remain in the country. Marshall Boyer, whose parents were landowners, was also able to stay in Hancock County, but his sharecropping uncles and aunts left to find work in Detroit after the weevil came.[61] Jean Toomer arrived in September of 1921—the

---

59 As Mark Schultz succinctly stated, "[a]nd then the boll weevil arrived in 1921, and the total wealth in the county dropped by half, never to recover." Schultz, 3.

60 There were 37% fewer farms in Hancock County at the close of the 1920s than there were at the beginning of the decade. Schultz, 60.

61 Schultz, 22. Although the local population declined slightly between 1910 and 1920, the post-weevil demographic shifts were profound. Between 1920-1930, one third

beginning of the cotton harvest season, and a time when the paucity of the cash crop was painfully obvious. He left in early November (the month in which he set his one poem that talked about the boll weevil), and dramatically understated the impact of the infestation.

Although many of the early reviews of Cane praised the book for its truthfulness in representing southern life, critics have long been divided over the question of Toomer's historical versimillitude. Robert Jones, Alain Solard, and others have argued that Toomer's main representational strategies in the rural sections of Cane are myth and mysticism, while Barbara Foley has focused on Toomer's extensive use of thinly-veiled versions of real places, people, and events to argue for the work's historical orientation.[62] My contention is that the first and third sections of Cane, which are set in rural Georgia, are indeed profoundly historically engaged—but engagement is not the same thing as historical accuracy. Toomer's creative distortions of the boll weevil infestation, the Sparta Agricultural and Industrial Institute (where he taught), and racial violence in Hancock County, while meant to create an accurate portrait of black southern life, are in

---

of the Hancock population (white and black) left, and the number of tenants diminished nearly by half (to 1,136). Even those who were able to stay on experienced new pressures. In 1922, Dick Sykes, a local white farmer, pressured Mary Hunt's mother to take her children out of summer school and put them to work poisoning weevils in the fields; Mrs. Hunt refused, and Dick Sykes laughed and said he would go on to the next farm. Not all black people had the kind of relationships with their landlords where such a refusal was possible; the economic devastation wrought by the weevil affected both the immediate financial and the long-term educational prospects of county residents. Schultz, 13-14, 22.

62 See Robert B. Jones, Jean Toomer and the Prison-House of Thought: A Phenomenonology of the Spirit. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1993; Alain Solard, "Myth and Narrative Fiction in Cane," Callaloo 8 (1985): 551-62 and Barbara Foley "Jean Toomer's Sparta," American Literature 67 (1995): 747-75 and "In the Land of Cotton": Economics and Violence in Jean Toomer's Cane," African American Review, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Summer, 1998):181-198.

tension with his depictions of rural black moderns, and point instead to the difficulties faced by an urban narrator trying to make sense of a rural community.

"November Cotton Flower" is one of three pieces in Cane that explicitly mention the boll weevil:

November Cotton Flower

Boll-weevil's coming, and the winter's cold,
Made cotton-stalks look rusty, seasons old,
And cotton, scarce as any southern snow,
Was vanishing; the branch, so pinched and slow,
Failed in its function as the autumn rake;
Drouth fighting soil had caused the soil to take
All water from the streams; dead birds were found
In wells a hundred feet below the ground—
Such was the season when the flower bloomed.
Old folks were startled, and it soon assumed
Significance. Superstition saw
Something it had never seen before:
Brown eyes that loved without a trace of fear,
Beauty so sudden for that time of year.[63]

"November Cotton Flower" is made up of three sentences, the first of which continues for nine full lines, and concludes with the line "Such was the season when the flower bloomed." Because the single branch in line four is connected to the plural "stalks" in line two, and stands in for the entire harvest, "the flower" that bloomed may be singular

63 Toomer's prose piece "Esther" mentions the boll weevil in a catalog of conversation topics proposed by the narrator while courting a taciturn young woman: "Mr. and Miss So-and-So, people, the weather, the crops, the new preacher, the frolic, the church benefit, rabbit and possum hunting, the new soft drink they had at old Pap's store, the schedule of the trains, what kind of town Macon was, Negro's migration north, bollweevils, syrup, the Bible." Toomer, Cane, 16. Similarly, in "Kabnis," the weevil is part of an eccentric conversation that the character Lewis recounts: "We had a talk. But what he found queer, I think, was not my opinions, but my lack of them. In half an hour he had settled everything: boll weevils, God, the World War. Weevils and war are the pests that God sends against the sinful." Toomer, Cane, 99.

or plural. In this poem, there may be one off-season cotton flower or many, but the victory the blossom represents is pyrrhic because winter rainfall and low temperatures ensure that no cotton plant that blooms outside in Georgia in November can come to maturity.[64] Whether this poem is literally about a plant or symbolically about the coming to maturity of a young woman (possibly Karintha or Fern, both of whom are likened to November cotton flowers elsewere in the book), or about both things simultaneously, the central image has an inherant fatalism. Regardless of whether one reads the opening words of the poem, "Boll-weevil's coming," as a subject and verb (meaning "the boll-weevil is coming") or as a noun phrase (meaning "the coming of the boll-weevil"), the poem minimizes the weevil's impact—in the first reading, by setting the cotton crop failure before the pest's arrival, or in the second by attributing the devastation to a myriad of factors. The natural world is broken in "November Cotton Flower," and Toomer presented the causes of that brokenness as organic (cold winter weather and drought), rather than a surprising and terrible imposition from the outside—which is how the actual boll weevil infestation was experienced by Sparta-area locals.

Toomer opted to reimagine the cotton crop failure in Cane, and also transformed the shock and dismay felt by the local community into more positive poetic emotions. The turn in the final couplet of "November Cotton Flower" emphasized love, fearlessness, and the appreciation of beauty in the face (and perhaps as a product) of agricultural devastation. This reversal is congruent with other pieces such as "Song of the Son," in which Toomer presented agrarian life as a thing of the past—the work of a "song-lit race of slaves" unable to reach modernity and freedom because they were

64 Any winter precipitation will severely damage or destroy the cotton boll—the part of the plant from which money is made; a cotton plant needs to remain dry for approximately 80 days after flowering to ensure that the boll survives.

tethered to southern agricultural work. The destruction of the cotton crop in "November Cotton Flower" thus represents a breaking of the bonds of servitude. But Toomer's depiction of the local reaction to the failed cotton crop in "November Cotton Flower" is striking because it was at odds with the community's actual reaction, with his modernist depictions of other black rurals in Cane (discussed earlier in this chapter), and also with the educational philosophy and program of the school at which he was teaching—a black agricultural college modeled after Tuskegee, which took yeoman farming and agricultural sustainability very seriously as vehicles for black economic and social independence.

Although Toomer chose not to depict these feelings, shock and dismay were utterly reasonable reactions in Hancock County in 1921, because the community had previously had myriad reasons to be optimistic about their ability to survive an infestation. The 1920s boll weevil infestation in the American South is often presented as analogous to the Dust Bowl droughts on the Plains during the Great Depression, but this comparison fails to account for the variable local experiences of weevil infestation and the extremely protracted nature of the pest's spread. The weevil had been a widely known agricultural pest for decades before it hit Hancock County. The insects first crossed into the United States near Brownsville, Texas, in 1892, and in 1894 the Division of Entomology of the U.S. Department of Agriculture formally began a study of the pest. The U.S.D.A. published circulars for farmers in 1896 and 1897 proposing remedial treatment, and by 1905 American scientific journals were regularly reporting on eradication efforts.[65] By 1921, American scientists and farmers had long worked in tandem to find methods to stop the insects. Their solutions included chemical pesticides, manual removal, burning or plowing winter fields to destroy hibernation habitat, the

65 L.O. Howard, "The Mexican Cotton Boll Weevil," Science, Vol. 18, No. 465 (Nov. 27, 1903): 693.

introduction of pest-resistant cotton varieties, and other containment efforts—all of which bore fruit in certain areas of the country.[66] Once the weevil arrived in a region, it was almost impossible to eradicate. But the damage it did to local cotton crops could be mitigated by human actions and a little luck—in part because the same natural variables that could threaten a cotton crop in its early stages (excessive rainfall and very hot or cold temperatures) could also destroy a whole crop of weevils, depending on when they hatched.

The boll weevil arrived in Georgia in 1920, as the cotton production data from census records and ginners reports clearly show. In 1919, the state produced 1,681,907 500-pound bales of cotton. In 1921, Georgia produced less than half that amount (787,052 bales).[67] The boll weevil also damaged the quality of the cotton, causing plants to produce shorter (and less valuable) cotton fibers.[68] Still, a decreased crop yield was not

---

66 Because of the timing and the fact that the workers are mowing down weeds, it is plausible that the mowing of the field taking place in "November Cotton Flower" shows an attempt to destroy boll weevil hibernation habitat. Hancock County farmers tried a myriad of techniques to combat the weevil in the summer and fall of 1921, including painting the cotton plants with a homemade insecticide mixed from water, cane syrup, and calcium arsenate. Unfortunately, this particular mixture also attracted and poisoned mules, and was quickly abandoned. Sparta Ishmaelite (1 July 1921): 3; (29 July 1921): 1.

67 The Sparta Ishmaelite newspaper reported even more dramatic numbers: 2,506 ginned bales in 1920 and 431 in 1921 (21 Oct. 1921): 1.

68 The United States Department of Agriculture's USDA Yearbook 1921: The Year In Agriculture (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1922) noted that about 98% of Georgia's cotton crop in 1919 and 1920 was already of the less-valuable short staple varieties because these were the most adapted to the region's climate. Boll weevils would severely damage the value of this already short-staple crop (371). Farmers with infected cotton could still count on some revenue from cotton seeds, which, depite the fact that they were unprofitable to transport over long distances, yielded oil that was being extracted and used in a variety of consumer products starting in 1875. In 1920, were 675 seed-crushing oil mills distributed throughout the Cotton Belt (376). There does not seem to have been a seed-crushing mill in Hancock County in 1921, so local farmers

necessarily bad news for cotton farmers because it typically meant higher prices. The 1921 United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) annual yearbook mapped the spread of the boll weevil infestation, and noted its profound economic impact. Government agricultural scientists encouraged cotton farmers to diversify their crops, and made an economic forecast that was somber but optimistic.[69] Although the last sentence in the yearbook's chapter on cotton focused on the boll weevil, the report summary discussed the price increases that typically accompanied a short cotton crop, and the unusual factors that were holding prices down (in the opinion of the editors, temporarily):

> Ordinarily a short crop in the United States should result in high prices, which would in some measure offset low yields. But the extraordinarily large carry-over from the crop of 1920 resulted in low prices to farmers with a very small crop. The situation was made worse by the [overseas] industrial depression, which greatly reduced the demand for cotton....the South was further oppressed by high prices for fertilizers and....increased transportation costs. Taken together all of these factors produced a severe economic depression in the South. Of course it is not expected that these conditions will continue long.[70]

The experts in 1921 all agreed that the arrival of the boll weevil did not necessarily mean the death knell for a local cotton economy. But the intensity of crop destruction that the insect caused in the Sparta area, coupled with aberrantly low cotton prices, meant economic devastation for a community so dependent on a single cash crop. The agricultural economy that had survived and quickly rebounded from the upheavals of the Civil War and Reconstruction was no match for the perfect storm of boll weevil, bad weather, and depressed world cotton markets in 1921.[71]

---

were probably unable to make money from that by-product, and had to continue to use it locally as fertilizer and animal feed.

69 USDA Yearbook 1921, 365 – 6.

70 USDA Yearbook 1921, 404.

71 In the years before the boll weevil infestation, Hancock County (like many counties in the Cotton Belt) had produced bumper crops of cotton. World War I had

Toomer saw the devastation in rural Georgia first-hand because part of his job as acting principal was to go out into the community and represent his school. During his two months at the Sparta Agricultural and Industrial Institute (called "Ingraham's College" by locals), he taught liberal arts classes on campus. But he also visited homes, businesses, and churches, both in town (a mile-and-a-half away), and in the surrounding countryside.[72] Toomer noticed and commented on the differences between town and country people in Hancock County, which he saw as harbingers of the demise of the black rural folk culture he found so inspiring. But although the townsfolk worked hard to distinguish themselves from their rural neighbors, to a young man from the nation's capital, Sparta still looked like a one-horse town. Although it was the county seat, with a

---

created a temporary upswing in farm commodity prices, which encouraged southern farmers to plant more acreage. The U.S. Government also aggressively pushed farmers to bring more land under cultivation during the war; fields that would otherwise lie fallow were pressed into service, and new fields were cleared for agricultural use. In the rural South in 1920, two-thirds of the available crop land was used to grow cotton. This problem of dependence on a single cash crop was compounded by increased international cotton cultivation in Egypt and parts of South and Central America, as well as government subsidies for western agribusiness—particularly dams and watering systems that were transforming California into a cotton producing powerhouse. New cotton regions were not plagued with the depleted soil that most of the southern cotton belt had to contend with after over 100 years of gorwing the nutrient-demanding crop. USDA Yearbook 1921. After World War I (despite the demand created by continuing relief efforts in Europe), the massive oversupply of crops caused a precipitous drop in American farm product prices. Most of rural America sunk into a post-war agricultural depression that was so deep it made the Great Depression seem like a blip on the radar. Farmers in Hancock County laughed when asked about the Great Depression's significance because it seemed like merely more of the same hard times. The major difference was that the Great Depression slowed rural outmigration in the 1930s because there were few jobs to be had in cities. Many rural people during this period raised and sent food to their urban relations, who otherwise would have gone hungry. Schultz, 336-7.

72 Cynthia Earl Kerman and Richard Elridge, The Lives of Jean Toomer: A Hunger for Wholeness (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1987): 81.

population of only 1,895 people, Sparta was too small to be designated as a city according to the U.S. Census Bureau.[73] The town had a railroad station, two printing companies, five churches, one hotel, two cotton gins, a planing mill, a large lumber company yard and shed, an unused ice house, two cotton warehouses, a grade school, a post office, a telephone exchange, the county court house and jail, and the town's utility company (which provided city water and electricity, and had an engineer on duty eighteen hours a day). There were twenty streets in the town, not paved but level and "in good condition" according to the fire insurance inspector. The town also had two artesian wells, a volunteer fire department, and a segregated town cemetery that, unbeknownst to Toomer, held an elaborate funeral monument to David Dickson, the family's white patriarch, installed by Toomer's own father, Nathan, to honor his late father-in-law.[74]

As a new college student in 1915, Toomer had planned to study agricultural science, with the aim of restoring his family's farming fortune, but quickly grew tired of the major (as he did with fitness, biology, sociology, and history). Toomer's brief formal agricultural education took place in the urban North, at predominantly white institutions far removed from the day-to-day concerns of black sharecroppers.[75] Black agricultural schools such as Sparta A & I, by contrast, developed outreach programs to educate small farmers beyond their campuses, and used high-concept scientific demonstrations as well as catchy jingles, songs, and slogans in an attempt to make their message of self-sufficiency stick with their diverse populations of learners:

---

73 2,500 was the population required for a municipality to be considered urban.

74 Leslie, 128.

75 Toomer was enrolled at, but never matriculated from, the University of Wisconsin, the Massachusetts College of Agriculture (just outside of Boston), the American College of Physical Training in Chicago, the University of Chicago, New York University, and the City College of New York.

Some say we should make money,
And buy our home supplies;
But experience and science both teach us
They would deceive with lies.
Chorus: We'll grow our home supplies
We'll grow our home supplies
We never expect to give the struggle over,
But grow our home supplies.[76]

Mottos such as "Give to the soil and the soil will give to you," and "Ten acres clear of debt are better than a hundred with an overdue mortgage," and songs such as the one above about rural self-sufficiency were part and parcel of learning in black rural schools, and likely seemed banal to a cosmopolitan young teacher like Toomer, who was more interested in polytheism and deity evolution than crop rotation, outhouse construction, or animal husbandry.[77] Toomer was frustrated by his students' inability to grasp the significance of his lectures on art, literature, and philosophy, and noted wryly that their suspicion of his sophisticated ways was only somewhat mitigated by the fact that he attended church with them once a week. But just as Toomer viewed his students as poor interlocutors, it is likely that they too wrestled with their new teacher's limited familiarity with the agricultural curriculum and the nuances of rural culture.[78]

---

76 Songs and slogans from period articles in Hampton's Southern Workman (No. 46, "Mixing Brains with Farming: An Interview with John B. Pierce," and No. 54 "Advertising Extension Work") and state Negro Extension program Annual Reports (1916-1928) from Mississippi, North Carolina, Texas, and Virginia, cited by Earl W. Crosby, "Limited Success against Long Odds: The Black County Agent," Agricultural History, Vol. 57, No. 3 (July, 1983): 282.

77 Jean Toomer letter to Alain Locke (November 8, 1921). Jean Toomer Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University (Box 164-90, Folder 12).

78 Many black urbanites maintained an active connection to rural life by attending annual reunions in their rural home places; exchanging letters with extended family members in the country; sending their children down to family farms in the summers; contributing funds to rural church- and school-building projects; and receiving regular care packages of homemade canned goods, smoked meats, and quilts from their

Barbara Foley, the only critic who has written about Sparta A & I at any length, argued that Cane manifests the same rejection of Booker T. Washington's educational philosophy and strong affiliation with W. E. B. DuBois's pedagogical approach that Toomer himself felt and expressed in his letters mailed from Sparta in 1921. Foley noted that "Toomer was probably making oblique reference to his problematic position as substitute principal when he wrote to [Alain] Locke from Sparta that 'there is poetry

---

rural relations thanks to the Post Office's Rural Free Delivery program, which brought regular mail service to rural households beginning in 1891. The rural delivery program started with only a handful of routes and carriers, but the number of rural postal routes increased dramatically after the 1913 introduction of parcel post service and the 1916 Rural Post Roads Act, which authorized federal funding for rural postal roads. Toomer's rural antecedents were remote and mysterious to the young author. Toomer's maternal grandfather, P.B.S. Pinchback, came from a prominent Louisiana farming family. The Pinchback agricultural fortunes declined after the Civil War, and, early-on, Grandfather Pinchback (with whom Toomer lived as a child and young adult) had abandoned all thoughts of agricultural pursuits—and turned instead to a career in politics. Toomer's writer friends Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston visited the Pinchback family plantation on their trip South in 1927, but it was hardly a conventional rural homecoming. When they arrived, there was no-one to greet, spin yarns, and share a meal with them. They were not invited to sit for a spell on the porch, or to pitch in and help with chopping weeds or harvesting crops. Visiting the Pinchback homeplace meant looking at abandoned buildings, and contemplating the family's rural past; for that family, there was no meaningful rural present. Toomer's paternal agricultural connections seemed even more remote to the young writer in the 1920s. His parents were estranged after only a year of marriage, and the only person who seemed willing to occasionally discuss his father, Nathan Toomer, with the young Jean was his kindly and somewhat eccentric uncle Bismark Pinchback. It is clear that Toomer knew very little about his father's family in the early 1920s; in a 1922 letter to a publisher, he described them as from "middle Georgia," the term he frequently used when writing about his time in Sparta. Toomer ended up teaching at a small agricultural college near the rural home place of his father's late first wife because of a job offer from a friend of his grandfather, and because of his desire to learn about his paternal heritage—not because he wanted to learn about modern farming. Jean Toomer, "Incredible Journey" notes from Chapter 1, Part 2 (autobiographical writings), Jean Toomer Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

here-and drama, but the atmosphere for one in my position is almost prohibitory.'"[79] My contention is that Toomer's representations of the school are interesting because they are inconsistent with other more experimental parts of the book. Toomer's literary depiction of Sparta A & I's atmosphere in Cane began with the visiting teacher Ralph Kabnis's rough living quarters, which he described in the opening of the book's third section:

> Ralph Kabnis, propped in his bed, tries to read. To read himself to sleep. An oil lamp on a chair near his elbow burns unsteadily. The cabin room is spaced fantastically about it. Whitewashed hearth and chimney, black with sooty saw-teeth. Ceiling, patterned by the fringed glow of the lamp. The walls, unpainted, are seasoned a rosen yellow. And cracks between the boards are black. These cracks are the lips the night winds use for whispering. Night winds in Georgia are vagrant poets, whispering. Kabnis, against his will, lets his book slip down, and listens to them.[80]

The walls and ceiling of Kabnis's cabin are made with rough-hewn boards, the cracks between which render the building a permeable boundary between inside and outside—the vehicle through which the natural world (represented by the winds) speaks.

Two paragraphs later, a rat runs across the thin ceiling boards of Kabnis's room, sending a spray of "powdery faded red dust" down on the protagonist, and making him think of the "[d]ust of slavefields, dried, scattered." Next, we learn that the adjoining room of the cabin is used as a henhouse. On the following pages, Toomer described the school using the slave plantation terms "quarters" to refer to his lodgings, and "the big house" to refer to the central building, which he described as: "[t]he large frame house, squatting on brick pillars."[81] He emphasized the compulsory nature of work there by

---

79 Jean Toomer letter to Alain Locke (November 8, 1921). Jean Toomer Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University (Box 164-90, Folder 12). Cited in Foley, "Jean Toomer's Sparta," 760.

80 Toomer, Cane, 81.

81 Toomer, Cane, 83.

having his protagonist call the college "the school I'm driven to teach in,"[82] and then returned to the theme of slavery by talking about the lack of separation between human beings and animals in a soliloquy:

> "Look around. Whats beautiful there? Hog pens and chicken yards. Dirty red mud. Stinking outhouse. What's beauty anyway but ugliness if it hurts you?....This loneliness, dumbness, awful, intangible oppression is enough to drive a man insane. Miles from nowhere. A speck on a Georgia hillside. Jesus, can you imagine it—an atom of dust in agony on a Georgia hillside? That's a spectacle for you. Come, Ralph, old man, pull yourself together."[83]

The college in Cane is described as dirty, smelly, ugly, isolated, demeaning, and confining—very much like a stereotypical slave plantation. In some ways, this depiction is not surprising because the actual school was started on three acres of what was Judge Linton Stephens' plantation—the place where the school's founder, Linton Stephens Ingraham, was enslaved as a child and worked as a house servant.[84]

Toomer was unconventional in insisting in 1923 that plantation geography and architecture was inextricably bound up with, and evocative of, the brutal realities of slavery. He was also an unlikely exponent of that view because of his complex family associations with plantations. Stephen Best noted that "slavery is not simply an

---

82 Toomer, Cane, 83.

83 Toomer, Cane, 83. Udo O. H. Jung noted that the spirituals that are so central in Cane were not contemporary work songs; Toomer most likely based them on slavery-era songs collected by Frederick Law Olmstead circa 1840, which Toomer read as part of his Washington, D.C. writers group's focus on slavery (which started in January of 1921). Udo O. H. Jung, "Spirit-Torsos of Exquisite Strength: The Theme of Individual Weakness vs. Collective Strength in Two of Jean Toomer's Poems," In Therman B. O'Daniel, ed. Jean Toomer: A Critical Evaluation (Washington: Howard UP, 1988): 329-36. The choice to use older music would be consistent with Toomer's representations of twentieth century black farming as slavery.

84 Eileen B.McAdams, "Sparta Agricultural and Industrial Institute," Hancock County Georgia Schools (2005). Local hisory website. Accessed 10/22/10. http://www.georgiagenealogy.org/hancock2/spartaa&i.html.

antebellum institution that the United States has surpassed, but a particular historical form of ongoing crisis involving the subjugation of personhood to property."[85] Best was writing about legal and aesthetic representations (including literary works), but Jessica Adams, in Wounds of Returning, asserted that this crisis also pertains to geography, and particularly to plantation geography: "the strange and contradictory possibilities that slavery released into the realm of the normal still shape social spaces, including the reimagined plantation" of postslavery America.[86] Adams described the complex erasure of slavery from the plantation landscape after the preservation movement began with the 1853 restoration of George Washington's Mount Vernon plantation—a movement that was later spurred on by D.W. Griffith's 1915 film Birth of a Nation, which re-cast Civil War history and race relations from the perspective of white southerners.[87] By the 1920s, images of mouldering and endangered plantation houses were more common than those of restored grandeur. Nonetheless, plantations were becoming "theaters of memory" and popular tourist destinations for whites because:

> historic house' or 'unique architecture' or 'romantic' comes to mind before the image of slavery does. And when it does, it will have been filtered through architecture and romance and perhaps not seem so disturbing any more.[88]

Toomer briefly studied agriculture in college in the hopes that he could restore both his family's lost agricultural fortunes and the Pinchback Plantation itself. The young writer was in the unusual position of having relatives on both sides of his family who were initially enslaved on a plantation that they later came to own; the plantation-derived

---

85 Stephen M. Best, The Fugitive's Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004): 16.

86 Jessica Adams, Wounds of Returning: Race, Memory, and Property on the Postslavery Plantation (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2007): 4-5.

87 Adams, 54-6, 73.

88 Adams, 55-6.

wealth afforded the freedpeople and their descendants great privileges. Toomer's white great-grandfather, William Pinchback, purchased the 2,363-acre family plantation in March of 1840 for $29,500.87 ½. Five years later, he purchased his four children (including Toomer's grandfather, Pinckney, then age ten) and his wife, Eliza Stewart, for $100, and then freed them.[89] Before the Civil War, most members of the family lived in that complex legal state that Saidiya Hartman described as formally free but "no less assuredly trapped within a circuit of bondage."[90]The family moved to Cincinnati after William died to avoid the possibility of reenslavement, but they also reaped from afar the social and economic benefits of plantation ownership. Toomer's father, Nathan (also a former slave), amassed considerable landholdings, and inherited property from his late wife, Amanda Dickson. Amanda was a former slave who inherited one of the largest plantation estates in Hancock County from her white father, David Dickson; she was touted by the black press as the wealthiest colored woman in America during her lifetime.[91] So for Toomer, plantations connoted servitude, but they also connoted vast personal wealth and prestige—the latter things being what so many white tourists of the era made imaginative claims on when visiting renovated plantation sites. Toomer had actual claims on lost plantation fortunes, and first-hand experience of the nuanced meanings of black-owned post-bellum plantations, but he chose instead to characterize the former plantation in Sparta as inevitably and primarily oppressive for its twentieth century African American residents.

---

89 "William Pinchback Deed," Holmes County Records, Book H (April 7, 1845): 5-6. Holmes County, Mississippi. Retrieved online 7/9/11 from "Holmes County MS GenWeb": <http://msgw.org/holmes/court/williampinchbackdeed.htm>.

90 Best, 13.

91 Scruggs and VanDemarr, 20-21.

Contrary to Toomer's depictions, the real Sparta A&I was more than the sum of its geographical and cultural antecedents.[92] Older plantation buildings were maintained and used, but principal Ingraham fundraised doggedly—both locally and in the North—to build modern facilities for his students. When the college opened in 1910, it had only one small building. Six years later, it enrolled 135 pupils and had a modern industrial department headed by a woman—Hildonia P. Canady, the daughter of a prominent Atlanta minister. In 1919, Sparta A&I was still growing, and Ingraham and the school trustees raised $3, 459 in matching funds for a Rosenwald school building—the most impressive structure on campus, and one that Toomer described in Cane as an antebellum residence ("the big house") rather than as a modern instructional space.[93] While no match for the architectural grandeur of local municipal buildings such as the courthouse (the tower of which was visible from the school across a vale, swap, and bank of pines),[94] the main school building at Sparta A&I was large enough to house five classrooms, and was built from a state-of-the-art plan designed by two Tuskegee architecture professors:

---

92 As Kendrick Grandison noted, most black colleges in this era were decidedly postbellum, and their physical plants (built landscapes and natural surroundings) reflected both resistance and accomodation to southern white power structures. Kendrick Ian Grandison, "Negotiated Space: The Black College Campus as a Cultural Record of Postbellum America." American Quarterly 51.3 (Sept. 1999): 529-79.

93 Rosenwald partially funded the construction of almost 5,000 schools for African-Americans in the rural South between 1912 and 1932. Barbara Foley noted that Toomer's description of "the big house" matched the picture of the school building featured in Sparta A&I's 1921-22 brochure. Barbara Foley, "Jean Toomer's Sparta," 49-50. Although sponsored by the Rosenwald Fund, the majority of the money for this school (and most of the schools built in this program) came from local sources. The Sparta A&I building contributions were: Negroes $250.00, Whites $200.00, Public funds $3,000.00, Rosenwald $500.00. Fisk University Special Collections, "Fisk University Rosenwald Fund Card Database." Online catalog. Accessed: 10/22/10. <http://rosenwald.fisk.edu/?module=search.>.

94 Toomer, Cane, 83.

Robert R. Taylor and W. A. Hazel. Because rural areas rarely had electricity, Taylor and Hazel designed all their Rosenwald schools with large banks of windows to provide natural light. They specified room size and height, classroom furniture and its placement, and even paint colors, in an attempt to reduce glare and create optimum conditions for student learning:

> Rosenwald schools also had their own color schemes, and specific requirements for interior appointments. Especially in the early years of the building program, school façades were often painted with a nut brown or "bungalow" stain and white trim; white with gray trim and light gray with white trim were also recommended. Interior paint schemes employed bands of color to accentuate the effect of the battery windows on light levels and students' vision. Walnut or oak-stained wainscoting ran along the lower section of classroom walls, surmounted by gray or buff painted walls and light cream or ivory ceilings. The resulting horizontal bands of color reflected and intensified natural light entering from the windows set above the wainscot, while the darker wainscot minimized glare at desk level for seated pupils. Light tan and translucent window shades also aided in controlling light levels.[95]

All Taylor and Hazel's school buildings had workrooms for industrial classes, cloak rooms, and kitchens. Large schools such as Sparta A&I also had libraries and faculty offices. Additionally, because Booker T. Washington saw black rural schools as community centers, the Rosenwald school buildings designed by his Tuskegee faculty also included meeting space, which was frequently used for community classes and events.[96] The simplicity of the Rosenwald school designs suggested Mission or Colonial

---

95 "Rosenwald Schools: Community School Plans, 1920-1928." National Trust for Historic Preservation website. Accessed 10/22/10. <http://www.preservationnation.org/travel-and-sites/sites/southern-region/rosenwald-schools/development-of-rosenwald-plans/community-school-plans.html.>

96 In smaller Rosenwald school buildings, this was accomplished by a movable partition that allowed classrooms to be joined together in an assembly hall. Larger buildings had permanent auditoriums. For more detailed information about Rosenwald school plans, see Tom Hanchett, "Rosenwald Schools: Beacons for Black Education in the American South" (2004). Website. <http://www.rosenwaldplans.org/SchoolPlans.html.>.

Revival architecture, and helped minimize building costs; their aesthetics were also meant to suggest order, rationality, and functionalism, and looked particularly modern when compared to the vernacular buildings that they typically replaced. Although only the building and its furnishings were inspected and approved by Rosenwald representatives, the school plans they disseminated also encouraged flowering plants, fences, lawns, and agricultural demonstration plots.[97] Additionally, the placement of the central school building was important because it was meant to be an example to the whole community of rural landscaping and farmstead organization.[98]

The Rosenwald plans were a good fit for Sparta A&I, which did serve as an important advocate for modern farming in the community. When Toomer arrived in 1921, enrollment at the school was nearing 200. All the students learned core academic subjects; the male students also learned skilled trades, agriculture, and animal husbandry, while the female students learned crafts and domestic science in the school's industrial education program. Although the successful fundraising drives and high enrollment numbers at Sparta A&I suggest that the school was successful in convincing local farmers that their curriculum was relevant, in their early years, the staff at most African

---

97 "School equipment received the same careful scrutiny to ensure that the building could have the greatest impact on its occupants. Blackboards along three walls served the teacher for instruction and students for practice assignments. Modern patent desks replaced the rough wooden slabs, pews, and benches typical of many other black schools. Often African American community members found it difficult to pay for patent desks in addition to their contribution to the building and asked to be relieved of this burden. White school officials would have preferred to transfer used furnishings from white schools over to black ones. However, the Rosenwald Fund remained firm and refused to make final payment on buildings that did not meet its standards for the exterior or interior." "Rosenwald Schools: Community School Plans, 1920-1928." National Trust for Historic Preservation website. Accessed 10/22/10. <http://www.preservationnation.org/travel-and-sites/sites/southern-region/rosenwald-schools/development-of-rosenwald-plans/community-school-plans.html.>

98 "Rosenwald Schools: Community School Plans, 1920-1928."

American agricultural and industrial schools had to work hard to overcome both the stigma against "book farming," and the very real concern that their innovations were of little use to black sharecroppers who had limited control over their land and the way they worked it. Karen Ferguson, Debra Reid, and Melissa Walker have all documented the shaky beginnings of African American agricultural extension work in Alabama, Texas, and Tennessee due to these same factors.[99] The fact that Toomer's job as a temporary assistant principal at Sparta A&I required him to ride out to different farmsteads in the county and meet with residents suggests that the school, even in 1921, could not afford to take its good relationships with a far-flung and diverse black rural community for granted, and had to continuously work to maintain its credibility.

When Toomer arrived at Sparta A&I, the school's principal, Linton Stephens Ingraham, had recently gone on record in the main Sparta newspaper, urging locals to follow the school's example and diversify their crops in order to survive the boll weevil infestation. Ingraham warned, "there is danger of many going hungry," and "plead[ed] with his white and colored friends here and everywhere to plant more grain in the next crop."[100] Only rarely did the white newspaper editors in Sparta cover the doings of local blacks, and even more rarely did they publish editorials by African Americans. Although Foley characterized Ingraham's 1921 writing in the Sparta Ishmaelite as accommodationist and conciliatory, the fact remains that a black man was held up as an

---

99 See Karen J. Ferguson, "Caught in 'No Man's Land': The Negro Cooperative Demonstration Service and the Ideology of Booker T. Washington, 1900-1918," Agricultural History (Winter 1998): 33-54; Debra Ann Reid, Reaping a Greater Harvest: African Americans, the Extension Service, and Rural Reform in Jim Crow Texas (Dissertation). College Station, TX: Texas A&M, 2007; and Melissa Walker, "Home Extension Work among African American Farm Women in East Tennessee, 1920-1939." Agricultural History 70.3 (Summer 1996): 487-502.

100 Sparta Ishmaelite (Nov. 4, 1921): 3.

authority on farming in the deep South, and given a venue to address and advise an interracial audience on this important topic.

Toomer's protagonist, Ralph Kabnis, may have had few qualms about killing someone else's chicken in anger and then hiding its body, but most people in the community would not have been so cavalier about wasting food. Hunger was a serious issue in Hancock County in 1921, as residents at all levels of the social hierarchy felt the economic blow of the boll weevil infestation. The county's black sharecroppers, who made up approximately half of the area's black farmers, were arguably the hardest hit by the cotton crop failure. Ingraham's plea for farmers to raise more grain was particularly poignant for this group, as the amount of cornmeal furnished to them by landlords dropped with the cotton crash.[101] Sharecroppers in the area (and throughout much of the South) were used to subsisting mainly on cornmeal, flour, molasses, fatty cuts of meat, and sweet potatoes; they grew only half as much food as did black land owners, and ate one-third the amount of meat.[102] The resulting protein and vitamin deficiencies meant high rates of rickets, pellagra, tuberculosis, and anemia in the region. Malnutrition was at its most intense during the winter and early spring (December through May) when farmers' gardens were not producing edibles, and the winter of 1921 looked to be even more bleak because of the decimated cotton crop and the resulting cash shortages.[103]

---

101 Piedmont sharecropper dietary studies found that pellagra rates declined during this period—a result of farmers growing more food crops and lessening their dependence on cornmeal. Schultz, 29.

102 Schultz, 29.

103 In the absence of welfare, food stamps, or other government-run social services, the black community had to band together to survive the boll weevil crisis. By the summer of 1922, conditions were so bad that numerous sick and elderly blacks moved into abandoned mill houses on the edge of town, and relied on individuals such as the devout Methodist Fionne Rozier Miller, who brought food each day, and cared for the physical needs of the indigent in much the same way that the fictional Carrie Kate in

Toomer glossed over most occupational distinctions between black farm workers in Cane, but the differences in autonomy for sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and farm laborers had profound implications for rural black people's quality of life. As Mark Schultz noted, "[w]ords such as tenant and sharecropper may evoke stereotypes, but in Hancock they hid within them a wide range of meanings."[104] Half of Hancock County tenants were renters in 1920, a category of worker that controlled their land and labor. Most of the other half worked on shares, agreeing to pay the landlord a portion of their yield—between one half and one quarter of their cotton and corn crops, depending on whether the tenant provided their own furnish (work animals, food, seeds, and equipment). Renters had more autonomy, and could more easily follow Sparta A&I's advice about the importance of domestic food production. Share tenants were legally employees of the landowner—not partners—and traditionally had less control over the uses to which their land was put. If a landlord objected to tenants using land for a garden or to raise livestock, tenants typically had to either capitulate or hide their domestic food production.[105]

Cane cared for the elderly black man who lived in her brother's blacksmith shop. Toomer, 101. Schultz, 183.

104 Shultz, 43.

105 Oral histories suggest that Sparta-area landlords tended to allow (and even encourage) gardening and livestock raising by tenants, and made a practice of confiscating part of the food along with their share of the cash crop—a practice looked down upon as exploitative by tenants. Schultz, 34. Gardening restrictions were prevalent throughout the rural South, so much so that extension workers often restricted their outreach to black landowners. Home demonstration agent Lea Etta Lusk, who worked in Washington County, Texas, for thirty-four years, did not programmatically exclude sharecroppers, but instead made it her policy to only work "with farmers who were free to plant gardens." Debra Ann Reid, Reaping a Greater Harvest: African Americans, the Extension Service, and Rural Reform in Jim Crow Texas (College Station, TX: Texas A&M P, 2007): 129.

It seems superficially counterintuitive that landlords would limit the gardening practices of their tenants since they routinely confiscated a share of the produce and livestock, but planters with large estates often had an economic incentive to make money off their tenants' commercial purchases:

> Early in the twentieth century bigger planters sometimes had a commissary or country store...which they might require their croppers to patronize. Goods there were usually offered at higher prices than found in town, especially if the purchases were made on credit, as the purchases of sharecroppers almost always were. Sometimes sharecroppers bypassed the planter and purchased supplies on credit directly from a country store. If so, the results were essentially the same: a growing bill with interest rapidly accruing from spring to picking time. Some lenders obviously gouged their debtors with outlandish interest, ranging, as one Mississippi critic of the system put it, "from 25 percent to grand larceny."[106]

Not all large landowners took such advantage of their tenants. Some creative landlords in the community responded to the boll weevil infestation by drawing up unusual (and mutually beneficial) contracts with their tenants that were consistent with the lessons Sparta A&I taught about interracial cooperation and home production. For example, Mary Lattimore and her husband worked out an arrangement with a local white man to raise peas and corn for animal feed, and were allowed to keep half the food crops. They also raised dairy calves that the man brought them, and were allowed to keep half the cattle in exchange for bottle-feeding the calves with the dry milk he supplied.[107]

Although this goes unremarked in Cane, advocating for domestic food production was serious business for blacks in the Georgia countryside, since it could easily be

---

106 Schultz, 33-4. Schultz also noted that "economists have discovered...these rates were universally high because the merchants themselves paid high interest rates to southern bankers, who in turn paid high rates to northern lenders" and also documented the heroic measures some merchants made in 1921-2 to spare their clients after the boll weevil hit (including one store operator who burned his ledger, personally absorbed $80,000 of bad debt, and spent the rest of his life working to pay it off).

107 Schultz, 33.

perceived as a challenge to the authority of white planters and the increasingly powerful merchant elite in town. The explosive potential of the issue suggests an additional reason to promote domestic production with simple jingles and rhymes—their formal simplicity may have rendered less threatening their very serious critiques of mendacity and economic exploitation, and their call for black resistance. That rural black agricultural schools would call for a change in the social order is not surprising, although this facet of their work is largely invisible in Toomer's depictions of Sparta A & I in Cane. Although often represented as conservative forces in rural communities, the larger project of black agricultural schools in the South, as Karen Ferguson has asserted, was itself inherently subversive: "to create an independent yeomanry through land ownership and self-sufficiency in a region where white prosperity depended on cotton monoculture and the subjugation of black labor."[108]

Toomer described a "sun-lit race of slaves" working the fields in Cane, but the students who worked the demonstration farm at Sparta A & I pictured themselves and their agricultural labor very differently. They were working to become independent farmers and community leaders, and to destroy the peonage system that severely constrained the life choices of the majority of African Americans who lived in the country in the 1920s.[109] And as county tax digests show, land ownership was the most

---

108 Ferguson, 48.

109 Mark Hersey noted that George Washington Carver, whose research findings and philosophy of environmental stewardship informed of much of the core agricultural curriculum taught by rural black agricultural schools in the South, was initially overambitious about the ability of modern farming methods to overcome racial animus and white economic control. When he first arrived at Tuskegge from Iowa in 1896, Carver thought that with modern farming and household management techniques, southern black people could lift themselves out of debt peonage within a decade. Nonetheless, even when he realized how deeply entrenched were the economic interests holding black farmers in perpetual debt, he and the other faculty at Tuskegee's

reliable path to prosperity for Hancock County blacks in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries:

> Independent black southern farmers may well have been the largest group of African Americans to achieve economic security before the Great Migration created a large black middle class in the North. They were certainly the first African Americans to gain middle-class status in Hancock County....the overwhelming majority of households that held assets worth at least six hundred dollars between 1880 and 1900 also owned one hundred or more acres of farmland; their city property, if they had any, was worth less than one hundred dollars.Few of them lived in Sparta, which was the county seat and the only town in Hancock....the same pattern holds for those who, from 1900 to 1930, owned property valued at three thousand or more dollars. For African Americans living in Hancock County during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, farming provided the most reliable means to achieve economic success.[110]

1920 was the peak of black farm ownership in the United States and also in Hancock County (where African Americans owned almost 34,700 acres of farmland). In 1920,

---

agricultural experiment station persisted in writing and circulating numerous pamphlets in straightforward, non-technical language that instructed black farmers on how to improve their situation with the limited resources they had at their disposal. Some examples of Tuskegee farmers publications include "How to Build Up Worn Out Soils," "How to Make Cotton Growing Pay," "Saving the Wild Plum Crop," "Successful Yields of Small Grains," "When, What and How to Can and Preserve Fruits and Vegetables in the Home," and "Twelve Ways to Meet the New Economic Conditions Here in the South" (which focused on the arrival of the boll weevil). And Carver himself accepted more and more speaking engagements at rural churches and agricultural fairs throughout the South—talking to landowners and tenants alike about sustainable farming techniques, analyzing local soil and plant specimens brought to him, and fielding numerous questions from his audiences. Mark Hersey, "Hints and Suggestions to Farmers: George Washington Carver and Rural Conservation in the South," Environmental History Vol. 11 (April, 2006): 244, 248, 250. Sparta A&I also drew upon resources closer to home, particularly the network of rural black schools lead by Henry Hunt at Fort Valley State that shared wisdom and resources through farmers conferences and print publications in an attempt to raise the land ownership rates (and autonomy) of Georgia's black farmers. Hunt, like Ingraham, was a Sparta native son, and a fellow Atlanta University graduate who turned down teaching opportunities elsewhere to work for black uplift in the rural South. Donnie D. Bellamy, "Henry A. Hunt and Black Agricultural Leadership in the New South," The Journal of Negro History, Vol. 60, No. 4 (October, 1975): 464-479.

110 Schultz, 46-8.

there were over 400 black landowners in Hancock County, 296 of whom owned more than seven acres and twenty-seven of whom owned at least one hundred acres. In other words, there were plenty of positive local examples for the students at Sparta A&I to emulate.[111] Additionally, the Great Migration seems to have improved the situation of the black people who stayed in the area. White landowners quickly realized that threats and violence would not keep their tenants from leaving for jobs in the urban North, so they worked to improve rural conditions. The sharp decline in personal and mob violence in the county starting in 1920 suggests that local whites started using their influence more aggresively to suppress anti-black violence.[112] Whites also discouraged black migration by approving new public funding for black education.

In Cane, Toomer depicted covert white charity for Becky, the white woman raising two mixed-race children in a ramshackle cabin "islandized between the road and the railroad track."[113] In contrast, the real Sparta A&I benefitted from the public economic support of local whites. Its curriculum turned on the importance of women in black rural uplift. While mainstream agricultural experiment stations and colleges—and their extension programs for white people—focused on the production of cash crops, Sparta A&I and other black agricultural schools and extension programs in the 1920s promoted susbsistence farming and domestic food production, much of which was held to be the purview of rural women.[114] Although plowing fields for food crops was generally

---

111 Schultz, 47-8.

112 Schultz, 162.

113 Toomer, Cane, 5.

114 Hersey, 250. As Earl Crosby found, "[i]mprovement of diet and general living conditions received extensive treatment. Black demonstration agents spent considerable time on relatively simple projects designed to improve sanitation. Door and window screening and the development of safe water supplies and drainage systems were important to demonstration projects. Efforts to develop year-round gardens to feed the

considered men's work in the rural South, much of the work of food production and preservation for the family was held to be the purview of women.[115] In cotton country, gardens were seen as extensions of the home. As such, gardening was generally considered appropriate work for women of any social class, although certain tasks (such as plowing) were typically assigned to men, and children were often responsible for weeding, watering, and scaring the birds away.[116] Drying and canning food were also considered women's work, and learning modern techniques for doing both were part of both the core curriculum for women at schools like Sparta A & I, and also a popular focus of extension courses and workshops out in the community.

Household economy was extremely important in the survival of marginal family farms, and contibuted greatly to a family's ability to provide their own home supplies. But the discipline also provided an important venue for black professional women like Hildonia Canady, who held the title of principal in Sparta A&I's Industrial Department when Toomer taught at the school. Canady was unusual because, in 1920, only 2.5% of African American women held professional positions. Those who taught at agricultural

---

family and livestock encouraged self-sufficiency. Lessons in how much food each individual in the family could be expected to consume, and how to preserve food, helped black farmers escape exorbitant food prices at country stores." Crosby, 281-2.

115 Kent Anderson Leslie has documented that this division of labor was first publicly advocated by black leaders in Georgia after the Civil War, and quickly adopted by Hancock County's ex-slaves, much to the dismay of local planters—who as a result had to cope with a 50% decline in the available labor force. Leslie, 60.

116 Mary Neth noted that during World War I, agricultural institutions such as the USDA also "encouraged women to do fieldwork because of the shortage of male laborers." Although many organizations stopped promoting women's field work after the war, there were some notable exceptions—particularly where mechanized farming was concerned. "The tractor made field work less difficult and opened it up as appropriate work for women and girls." Mary Neth, Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community, and the Foundations of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900-1940 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1995): 234.

high schools and colleges, and in rural extension programs, were part of an elite group who:

> benefited from their involvement in private and public reform. They gained visibility and used their positions to do race work by fighting the economic causes of social problems that affected black families. They also paved the say for a new profession using new methods and standards of home economics instruction as a model.[117]

Because of her position, Canady was a prominent person both at the school and in the broader black community, although Toomer does not appear to have created a fictional analog for her in Cane like he did for principal Ingraham (Hanby), and other men in the community.[118] In one sense this is unsurprising, as most of the female characters featured in Cane do not seem to work—or at least their work is not described at any length. By contrast, Toomer mentioned the occupations of most of his central male characters in the Georgia sections of Cane, talked about the work they did, and even featured them in or en route from their places of employment.[119] Numerous critcs have cited Toomer's tendency in Cane to create eroticized portraits of his female characters that focused on physical attributes and sexual behavior, while largely neglecting their interior lives. George Hutchinson reflected that in Cane, "women are the objects of a dominating male

---

117 Reid, 104-5.

118 For an extended discussion of fictional analogs for Sparta inhabitants in Cane, see Foley, "Jean Toomer's Sparta," 747-775.

119 In Cane, Karintha's occupation is not mentioned, Becky relies on the community for financial support, and Fern can be seen "most any time of day" sitting listlessly on her porch (15). Carrie Kate, Halsey's sister, does unpaid work in the community; she brings the lunch basket her mother fixes for Halsey each day, and also feeds the indigent old man who lives in Halsey's cellar, but it is not clear how she spends the rest of her time. Toomer depicts Carma driving a mule-drawn wagon and wearing overalls, both of which associate her with manual agricultural labor, but her work life is never clearly described (10-11).

desire,"[120] Janet Whyde argued that women's bodies are "obliterated and transformed through interpretation by an outside agent—the narrator/speaker and/or male characters," and thus made into metaphors,[121] and William Ramsey noted that, "[o]f course Toomer's gender politics today are indefensible."[122] As vivid and unsettling as some of Toomer's depictions of women are, I think it is equally important to look at the aspects of women's lives that he leaves out of Cane. Xiomara Santamarina has argued that literary representations of participation in the American capitalist economy were one way that nineteenth-century African American women writers asserted autonomy, self-respect, and civic and moral virtue; yet by so doing, they risked the critism that they were naturalizing stereotypes of African Americans as degraded physical laborers.[123] Toomer was interested in disrupting conventional ideas about sexual morality, and particularly in naturalizing interracial sexual desire, as well as in exposing the brutality of labor conditions for southern blacks in the countryside.[124] So a depiction of a successful and morally conservative black professional woman like Hildonia Canady would have worked against both of his objects.

Toomer's omission of women's work was striking because most African American women's lives in the historical Sparta revolved around hard physical labor—either on their family's farms, or as domestic servants for local whites, or both. The two women in Cane whose work we learn about in any detail are Esther, who works as a

---

120 George Hutchinson, "Jean Toomer and American Racial Discourse," 232.

121 Janet M. Whyde, "Mediating Forms: Narrating the Body in Jean Toomer's Cane. Southern Literary Journal 26.1 (Fall 1993): 43.

122 Ramsey, 80.

123 Xiomara Santamarina, Belabored Professions: Narratives of African American Working Womanhood. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2005.

124 Hutchinson, "Jean Toomer and American Racial Discourse," 234-5.

salesperson in her affluent father's grocery store in town, and the ill-fated Louisa, who is a domestic servant for a white family in Sparta.[125] In the historical Georgia, domestic service was the second largest occupation for blacks in 1920, second only to farming. Between 1900 and 1920, almost one-third of blacks worked in domestic service either full- or part-time. For sharecropping women, paid domestic work was often a second job they did after working in the fields. Wages in rural areas were low, and some domestics were paid only with leftover food, secondhand clothing and furniture, and other small household items.[126] There were few professional service jobs open to African American women, particularly in rural areas, which made teaching positions, such as those at Sparta A&I, all the more respected by and important to black communities. As Mary Rolinson noted, "Anything that black women (or black men for that matter) did to put their families first challenged whites in the community who wanted full access to blacks' obedience, labor, and bodies."[127] In the American South, where the needs of whites were commonly held to trump those of black families, female education such as Sparta A&I provided was a powerful political statement.

Louisa's fictional story in Cane highlights one of the main reasons why alternatives to domestic service were so important to Hancock County blacks in 1921. When the story "Blood-Burning Moon" opens, Louisa is sexually involved with Bob Stone, the white son of the family for whom she works, and expects a marriage proposal any day from her sweetheart Tom Burwell, a well-regarded black farm laborer who also works for the Stone family. Early on, Toomer shows that the relationship between Louisa and Tom is consentual; Louisa believes that Bob loves her, experiences a "warm glow"

---

125 Toomer, Cane, 22, 28.

126 Schultz, 58.

127 Rolinson, 137.

when she thinks about him, and he gives her luxurious presents: silk stockings and a purple dress.[128] But when the narration switches over to Bob's perspective in the story's third section, his virulent racism forces readers to question the degree of choice Louisa actually has in the matter:

> Bob Stone sauntered from his veranda out into the gloom of fir trees and magnolia. The clear white of his skin paled, and the flush of his cheeks turned purple. As if to balance this outer change, his mind became consciously a white man's. He passed the house with its huge open hearth which, in the days of slavery, was the plantation cookery. He saw Louisa bent over that hearth. He went in as a master should and took her. Direct, honest, bold. None of this sneaking that he had to go through now. The contrast was repulsive to him. His family had lost ground. Hell no, his family still owned the niggers, practically. Damned if they did, or he wouldn't have to duck around so. What would they think if they knew? His mother? His sister? He shouldnt mention them, shouldnt think of them in this connection. There in the dusk he blushed at doing so. Fellows about town were all right, but what about his friends up North? He could see them incredible, repulsed....They wouldn't understand, and moreover, who ever heard of a Southerner getting on his knees to any Yankee, or anyone. No sir. He was going to see Louisa tonight, and love her. She was lovely—in her way. Nigger way. What way was that? Damned if he knew....She was worth it. Beautiful nigger gal. Why nigger Why not, just gal? No, it was because she was nigger that he went to her.[129]

Ultimately, the two men learn of each other's relationships with Louisa. As a result, Bob attacks Tom, who easily overpowers and kills him in a fight. Then the white townfolks capture and lynch Tom in retaliation by severely beating and then burning him alive above a well in an old factory so "when the woodwork caved in, his body would drop to the bottom."[130]

Contemporary and period critics alike have praised Toomer's depiction of this lynching in Cane, noting how the young author successfully challenged the myth that

---

128 Toomer, Cane, 30.

129 Toomer, Cane, 31-2.

130 Toomer, Cane, 34.

anti-black mob violence was instigated by black men sexually assaulting white women.[131] That aspect of the book would also confirm what many rural black southerners wrote about sexual relationships in their own communities. Charles Denby noted in his memoir about his life in rural Alabama in the early decades of the century that the real problem was white men's sexual behavior: "[t]he majority of white men where I lived went with Negro women. Some lived with Negro women and raised families with them," though they were unwilling to have that fact acknowledged publicly.[132] Glenda Gilmore's study of racial and gender politics in North Carolina noted a similar pattern of interracial sex between white men and African American women.[133] What Toomer also did by exploring Bob and Louisa's relationship in "Blood-Burning Moon," and by depicting the many different skin colors of African Americans in the community thoughout Cane, was raise the issue of the sexual exploitation of black women by white men in the 1920s.[134]

---

131 W. E. B. DuBois, in a 1924 review, noted that Toomer was the first writer to defy conventional ideas about sex in the Negro world. "The Younger Literary Movement," Crisis 27 (February 1924): 161-163. Mark Schultz praised Toomer's insights in his discussion of the catalysts of antiblack violence in the South in general, and Hancock County in specific: "First, contrary to white perceptions then and now, relatively few black men killed by whites were thought to have assaulted white women. As the black activist Ida B. Wells argued at the time, only 20 percent of all black lynching victims were accused of rape (much less guilty of it). Using a larger database W. Fitzhugh Brundage found that accusations of rape approximated Wells's findings....The 'usual crime,' as it was then called, was actually unusual....In Hancock violent interracial incidents seemed to arise from conflicts between black and white men: over debts, over white demands for deference, and over black women, but inly very rarely over white women." Schultz, 146-7.

132 Charles Denby, Indignant Heart: A Black Worker's Journal (Boston: South End Press, 1978): 24.

133 Glenda Gilmore, Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920 (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1996): 68-9.

134 Danielle McGuire explores the legacy of this abuse in her recent study of sexual violence in the South. Danielle L. McGuire, At the Dark End of the Street: Black

Although there were consentual relationships in the historical Sparta between white men and black women that the community openly recognized, the threat of sexual harassment and assault motivated black families to keep women and children from working in white households, where they were particularly vulnerable.[135] In this, they were similar to rural Garveyites, who also made economic sacrifices to keep the women and girls in their families away from the dangerous proximity of white employers.[136] In these efforts, Hancock County blacks benefitted from the educational opportunities provided for young women at Sparta A&I. The school's emphasis on the importance of home supplies production gave an economic justification for keeping black women and girls employed on farms and out of domestic service. In addition to teaching women how to raise and preserve foodstuffs, small black agricltural school like Sparta A & I also taught farm and home management skills, and presented homemaking and childrearing as valuable full-time occupations that could and should be done in a modern, scientific way. They gave practical alternatives to domestic service by training their female students to start

---

Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power (New York: Knopf, 2010).

135 Schultz,148-9. The community was painfully aware of the sexual abuse of black women during slavery, the legacy of which profoundly shaped family relationships Hancock County. Nathan Toomer's late wife, Amanda, who was born in 1849 and raised in the county, was conceived when her white father raped her thirteen-year-old black mother, whom his family owned. Leslie, 1.

136As Mary Rolinson noted, "[t]he census reveals that Garveyite women were at home 'keeping house' or working on the 'home farm,' but they were not working as domestics or cooks in the homes of white landowners as many other black rural women were." Although the UNIA had no chapter in Hancock County in 1921, local black Hancock residents seemed to adopt similar strategies to protect the females in their community from sexual assaults and harassment by whites. Mary G. Rolinson, Grassroots Garveyism: The Universal Negro Improvement Association in the Rural South, 1920-1927 (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2007): 136.

profitable farm-based microbusinesses (such as poultry or livestock raising; beekeeping; small-scale dairying; and making handicrafts such as baskets, quilts, and rag rugs) to supplement the family income, and prepared young women for professional positions as teachers, tailors, and caterers. This educational approach was controversial because it prioritized the needs of black families and made it economically viable for more African American women to work outside of immediate white control.

REPRESENTING RURAL VIOLENCE

Before Ralph Kabnis is fired from his teaching job at the fictionalized version of Sparta A&I in Cane for unbecoming conduct (smoking and drinking alcohol), he spends a Sunday afternoon in the parlor of his new friend Fred Halsey, talking with him and Professor Layman (an itinerant preacher and teacher, and, like Halsey, a Georgia native) about race relations in the community. This second section of "Kabnis" culminates when a rock is thrown through Halsey's window with a threatening note wrapped around it, which reads: "You northern nigger, its time fer y t leave. Git along now."[137] Before this incident, the three men have an extended discussion about lynching that is instigated by Kabnis's comments about the positive local racial climate:

> Its diff—that is, theres lots of northern exaggeration about the South. Its not half the terror they picture it. Things are not half bad, as one could easily figure out for himself without ever crossing the Mason and Dixie line: all these people wouldnt stay down here, especially the rich, the ones that could easily leave, if conditions were so mighty bad. And then too, sometime back, my family were southerners y'know. From Georgia, in fact—[138]

Halsey responds by telling Kabnis that their particular county is safe, but he does so with a laugh that undermines the reassurance he offers. In the conversation that follows,

137 Toomer, Cane, 90.

138 Toomer, Cane, 87.

Layman mentions the Bill Burnham lynching, Halsey raises the subject of the Lampkins lynching (in which a pregnant woman was tied up and vivisected for attempting to hide her husband from a mob), and Kabnis asks about the peonage cases (in which a planter from a neighboring county brutally murdered eleven black convicts he had illegally working for him because he feared they would talk to a northern laborer investigator).[139] Discussion of these specific incidents of racial violence (the latter two of which Barbara Foley has established were based on actual period attacks on African Americans in neighboring counties) work in tandem with Tom Burwell's fictional lynching in the first section of Cane to undermine Kabnis's positive assessment of race relations in the Sparta area, and make him seem like an urbanite out of place in, and out of step with, his rural environment.[140]

The two local men, Halsey and Laymen, are both convinced that the threat wrapped around the rock did not come from a white person—so much so that they walk over to Kabnis's cabin later that night in the dark to check on him, and insist on lighting his lamp and fire when they get there (both of which make them all easy to see by would-be assailants). Halsey explains their convictions to the terrified Kabnis by saying,

> These aint th days of hounds and Uncle Tom's Cabin, feller. White folks aint in fer all them theatrics these days. Theys more direct than that. If what they wanted was t get y, theyd have just marched right in an took y where y sat.[141]

Their certainty points to something important about local race relations that Toomer undermined by setting a fictional lynching in town: the white planter elite in Hancock

---

139 Barbara Foley, "Jean Toomer's Sparta," 748.

140 Burwell's lynching, though it occurs sequentially before "Kabnis" in Cane, is actually set at a later time—so only the readers, not the characters, have knowledge of the event. In "Kabnis," Halsey mentions seeing Tom leave with his gun earlier in the day, and assumes he's out shooting rabbits and possum in the woods. Toomer, Cane, 92.

141 Toomer, Cane, 92.

County looked down on mob violence, and used their power to stop it. That influence meant that the only public lynching in the county took place in 1885, and its victim was a white man.[142] Anti-black violence in Hancock County was typically personal rather than public, the weapon of choice was more often a gun than a rope, victims were often shot in the back in secluded locales with no witnesses, and a victim's family had no legal recourse—even when the forensic evidence made it plain that the killing was murder (not self-defense, as the perpetrators typically claimed). Mark Schultz noted that this kind of personal attack was the most common form of anti-black violence in the rural South during this period, though it has been obscured by a focus on public lynchings:

> Many locations across the South witnessed a kind of furious carnival of violence in which white crowds gathered to watch and participate in the ritualized torture and murder of African Americans....In Oglethorpe County, two counties north of Hancock, five thousand people crowded together to watch a man tied, shot repeatedly, and burned in 1919....Although this kind of violence did in fact occur, it has grown to seemingly mythic proportions through art and literature, until it has obscured the more prevalent, though more prosaic, brand of murder that dominated the region.[143]

Schultz' contention was that even the most comprehensive lynching statistics compiled by the NAACP, Tuskegee University, and the Chicago Tribune are "only the tip of the

---

142 There was one 1930s lynching in Hancock that was not reported in the local newspaper, local crime reports, or in lynching statistics compiled by the Chicago Tribune, the NAACP, or Tuskegee. Mark Schultz learned about the case in oral interviews with the victim's family members, and distinguished it from the more dramatic, public crimes that tended to garner widespread attention. Schultz wrote, "a young black Hancock man named Hervia Ingram was castrated and thrown to his death from a speeding wagon sometime in the mid-1930s; the attack followed rumors that he had said 'something complimentary' to the daughter of his employer, a white sawmill operator. Reportedly the men of the woman's family abducted and killed him. The victim was the son of Sherman Ingram, a wealthy black sawmill owner. The incident is unusual in that is the only story in Hancock of the murder of someone related to a black landowner." Schultz, 150.

143 Schultz, 149.

iceberg" of anti-black violence in the rural South because most racial killings were done quietly and out of the public eye.[144] But even this kind of secretive anti-black violence declined markedly in Hancock County in the 1920s, as local whites worked to keep their labor force from "voting with their feet" and leaving for the urban North in response to racial oppression."[145]

Despite the myriad ways Toomer's book undercut this fact, the historical Hancock was in fact widely regarded as a "good" county by local blacks because most white people eschewed lynching and were satisfied by economic and political dominance, and ritual displays of black public deference (speaking softly in town and avoiding controversial topics, stepping off the sidewalk to let white people pass, using deferential forms of address, removing one's cap to show respect, maintaining segregated eating arrangements, etc.).[146] Jennifer Ritterhouse argued that 1920s codes of racial etiquette mandated a myriad of actions considered tantamount to physical violence by many African Americans, and shaped day-to-day interactions in profound ways.[147] The

144 Schultz, 150.

145 Hancock County was atypical, since most cotton counties had more public violence. As Mary Rolinson noted, "Charles S. Johnson's statistical analysis indicated that between 1900 and 1931, at least one lynching had occurred in over 60 percent of cotton counties but in only 30 percent of other crop-type counties." Rolinson, 127.

146 It was not unusual to have unusually safe and particularly dangerous counties side-by-side in the rural South. Mark Hersey commented on this phenomenon in Georgia: "It is worth acknowledging that the threat of white violence in Macon County remained only a threat. Thanks largely to Booker T. Washington's clout, there were no lynchings in the county following the establishment of Tuskegee Institute. Washington's clout, however, did not protect blacks in neighboring counties, even those affiliated with the institute. Indeed, in November 1902 Carver himself came very near being lynched. As he informed Washington, being forced to "walk nearly all Tuesday night to keep out of [the] reach" of an angry mob was the "most frightening experience of [his] life."146 Hersey, 268.

147 Jennifer Ritterhouse, Growing Up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2006): 37.

consequences of breaches were often severe, as Toomer's protagonist Ralph Kabnis seemed to fear when confronted with Mr. Ramsay, a white customer requesting an axe repair at Halsey's blacksmith shop:

> Kabnis burns red. The back of his neck stings him beneath his collar. He feels stifled. Through Ramsay, the whole white South weighs down upon him. The pressure is terrific. He sweats under the arms. Chill beads run down his body. His brows concentrate upon the handle as though his life was staked upon the perfect shaving of it.[148]

After a month at the blacksmith's shop, Kabnis is still profoundly uncomfortable with and fearful about, interactions with white southerners—and for good reason. Ritterhouse noted that perhaps as many as one quarter of the known 4,715 lynchings that took place in the South between 1882 and 1946 "resulted from breaches of racial etiquette that were seldom crimes even after white southerners rewrote state and local laws in the early twentieth century to incorporate even more detailed racial proscriptions."[149] Other than the universal use of courtesy titles such as "Mr.," "Miss," or "Boss" for whites of all ages, many forms of racial etiquette varied from place to place, and from person to person:

> When, how, and how forcefully white southerners would insist on demonstrations of humility was a matter of constant concern for African Americans. Would it be enough for a black man buying farm equipment or a black woman purchasing cloth in a dry goods store to be respectful and polite, or must he or she endure insults or engage in some further ritual of obsequiousness? There was simply no way to know.[150]

---

148 Toomer, Cane, 100.

149 Ritterhouse, 36.

150 Southern racial etiquette was ubiquitous, but it was also "flexible enough to adapt as the region slowly modernized between Reconstruction and World War II." Some of those modifications included the substitution of the terms "Mr." "Miss" for the slavery-era honorifics "Master," "Missus," and "Missy." This change in forms of address, although superficially small, was keenly felt by both blacks and whites, as neither of the

The local variations in racial codes, combined with the frequent interracial contact necessitated by country life, made Hancock County a difficult (and sometimes terrifying) place to navigate for an urban outsider.

Despite the very real humiliations visited on rural blacks, particularly in the town of Sparta itself, Hancock County's independent farmers had much wider economic and social latitude than might be infered from Toomer's totalizing depictions of local race relations in Cane. There were meaningful economic opportunities for blacks in the county in 1920—particularly for those individuals with friendship or kinship ties to powerful local whites (who often acted as patrons). This latitude and opportunity manifested itself in their successful business dealings, voting, support of black education, patronage of local churches, and participation in professional and uplift organizations. It was also evident in the respect many local blacks demanded from their white neighbors and employers, and the extent to which they would go to defend their families and property. Such accounts of black physical and social autonomy have to be taken with a grain of salt, as the community clearly granted wealthy white people the right to physically molest (and even kill) African Americans on any pretext. That said, Toomer still represented a much narrower range of behaviors and images for Hancock County's black residents in Cane than they did for themselves. For example, Dollie Walls's family had a long tradition of demanding respect, going back to Tuesday Walls, Dollie's great-grandfather—a powerful field hand who in slavery days, according to stories, refused to be beaten by his master or overseer:

> Tuesday Walls's stories of slave resistance became the central motif for race and labor relations for his descendants. For generations the Walls family traded on

---

new polite forms of address emphasized ownership or personal intimacy. Ritterhouse, 37-40.

> their reputation for hard work in order to demand—and according to them, receive—good treatment. At one sawmill where he worked, Dollie Walls heard the owner tell his son, the overseer, not to do anything to antagonize Walls because he was a good worker and the owner did not want to lose him. Walls stated his philosophy repeatedly and emphatically: "I'm going to treat them right. And they're sure going to treat me right."....The Walls family, a group of quiet, serious, hardworking, and physically imposing people, let whites understand that it would be in their best interest not to molest them physically or verbally.[151]

Willie Butts told similar stories about his enslaved great-grandfather, Wednesday.

Oral histories also make it clear that the African American residents of Hancock County in the 1920s did not have to look back multiple generations for examples of against-the-odds resistance to white domination. There were plenty of contemporary examples of local blacks defending their persons, honor, and property with a combination of physical resistance, threats of violence, and tactical maneuvering.[152] Dave Payton Wilson, a sharecropper near Devereaux, fought back when his white landlord's son threw a hammer at him during a dispute over mowing grass by chasing the young man with a pitchfork. Wilson left the farm that same day, and resettled his family on another nearby plantation—a move that allowed both men to save face, and avoid future problems.[153]

---

151 Schultz, 166.

152 David Delaney notes that in the Jim Crow South, "where actual power relations were clearest, segregation was not required," for example, for black porters, who worked "the whole train, not just the Jim Crow car," and for black servants who "were always allowed to accompany their [white] employers." David Delaney, Race, Place, and the Law: 1836-1948 (Austin: U of Texas P, 1998): 97. What these oral histories from Hancock County suggest is that a similar dynamic obtained there for racial etiquette; precisely because white power was so absolute, local whites did not feel threatened by occasional confrontations with blacks, and even expected them because racist ideologies of the day characterized African American men in particular as innately emotional and prone to theft and violence.

153 Schultz, 166. More dramatically, in 1923, Tommy Ray, a local man who had shot and killed a white farm owner, disappeared. Years later, Marshall Boyer (who was a teenager living in the area at the time of the gunfight) met Ray in Detroit, and learned that Ray's white landlord had taken the black man's side. When Winton Edmund realized that his tenant was going to be attacked by their disgruntled neighbor, he warned Ray, loaned

Saving face in the rural South sometimes involved elaborate schemes to avoid violent confrontations, and sometimes involved elaborate back-room schemes to foment them.

Toomer meant Cane to exemplify typical southern race relations, so leaving out the complex machinations of rural African Americans seeking racial justice by covert violent means was a significant omission. Charles Denby wrote of such incidents that took place in Lowndes County, Alabama, in the 1920s—incidents that he said were important in part because they were so typical: "What I wrote about in my early years...could be true of almost all Blacks living in the whole of South, USA," noted Denby.[154] One means by which African Americans in Lowndes County retaliated against two virulently oppressive white landlords was to start a feud between them over the recruitment and retention of black agricultural laborers:

> The Negroes were slipping from the Harvey Place to the Manton Place to live, and then from the Manton Place to the Harvey Place again. Usually it was a different individual each time but sometimes the same one would go back and forth. It had got so serious that Harvey and Manton were threatening that one more Negro better not go....it was no accident that the Negroes were moving back and forth. They felt it was the only way out of slavery. They hoped it would lead to the Manton and the Harveys killing each other out.[155]

Laborers (including Denby's uncle) fueled the conflict by telling the Harveys they had been forced to move to the rival plantation at gunpoint, passing on information about the rival family's habits (so individuals could be easily ambushed), and even participating as

---

him a large caliber pistol (his own .38—because Ray only owned a .32), and then hid him in the woods for several days after the gun battle, surreptitiously bringing him food and making a certain that the rest of the search possee (which he organized) stayed clear of the hiding place. He then arranged for a trusted white friend with a wagon to sneak Ray to the edge of Milledgeville under a load of hay. Finally, Edmund personally drove Ray from Milledgeville to Atlanta, and put him on a train for Detroit, saying "That's all I can do for you." Schultz, 173.

154 Denby, "Preface" (1978).

155 Denby, 21-22.

decoys in violent attacks between the families. Ultimately, the scheme worked. The male heads of the two white families did, in fact, kill each other off, and the black community reaped the very tangible benefits of the resulting relaxed social control:

> The plan to get rid of the Mantons and the Harveys took a year to carry out: 1922 until 1923. Not one Negro got hurt or was killed or in trouble. Today, Negroes in that plantation own their own land and automobiles, are sending their children to college, and are ginning and selling their own cotton.[156]

Denby wrote that he first learned of the plan from another child, who emphasized the life-or-death necessity of keeping it a secret.[157] Hasan Jeffries, in his study of civil rights struggles in Alabama, noted that violent repression by whites from Reconstruction through the 1960s forced "African Americans to make strategic decisions about which rights to pursue publicly," and led to a hidden history of black organizing and resistance.[158] Likewise, instances of black retaliation in Hancock County were typically kept quiet for many years by the participants, who realized that public mores required white domination to seem absolute. But, as Schultz put it, "[c]onfident in their control, the planters allowed the development of a rural culture in which the threat of violent retaliation by respectable blacks was tolerated and sometimes condoned."[159] Local

---

156 Denby, 24.

157 Denby, 21.

158 Hasan Kwame Jeffries, Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt (New York: New York UP, 2009): 2.

159 Schultz, 172. Although Schultz does not make this assertion, his research suggests that even disreputable local blacks had (and used) some very dramatic means of revenge against whites. It was common knowledge in Hancock County that local blacks would retaliate against even the most powerful landlords with theft and arson. Punishments for both crimes tended to be quite lenient—even when the monetary damage was significant—perhaps because the white community categorized the actions as manifestations of black moral inferiority rather than as resistance. The argument was that blacks were inherently prone to such anti-social acts, and thus should not be held strictly

blacks—particularly from the middle class, and those individuals known to be good farm workers—were often supported in defense of their rights against whites, especially when questions of manliness or honor were at stake. And whites minimized the import of many surreptitious attacks on their property (particularly through theft and arson) by attributing them to innate black degeneracy rather than seeing them as deliberate responses to racial oppression.[160]

CONCLUSION: THE SHOCK OF THE SOUTH

In 1923, Toomer reiterated a sentiment he had been expressing throughout the two years he worked on Cane: "I do not want art to be a mere transcription of life, technically OK; I want it to be the most vital and thrilling experience that life has to give."[161] Setting a fictional lynching in Hancock County, and depicting the local black agricultural college as perpetuating anti-black racism, allowed the young artist to create a book that was more thrilling than the actual black community on which it was based; these choices also built his credibility with northern audiences who had specific expectations about southern race relations.[162] Additionally, Toomer's aesthetic

---

accountable. Many local blacks seem to have taken advantage of this loophole in the racist logic to burn down the barns, outbuildings, and even cotton gins of whites when they thought they had been wronged.

160 Martin Summers' Manliness and Its Discontents (2004) traced how masculinity shaped black middle class mores in this period; his research focused on urban communities, and drew slightly different conclusions about the use and performance of violence.

161 Kerman and Elridge, 103.

162 One important exception was W.E.B. DuBois, who had himself spent time in the state, and flatly declared that, despite the merits of Cane (including its keen insights into human nature), the book showed that Toomer did not know Georgia. W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke, "The Younger Literary Movement," Crisis (1923): 16. Although this article was co-authored, Barbara Foley has established through letters between the journal's literary editor, Jessie Fauset, and Alain Locke between September and January

commitments enabled the young artist to depict his own intense feelings of fear and repulsion when faced with certain aspects of black rural life. As Toomer noted to Kenneth MacGowan, "Kabnis is really the story of my own real or imaginary experiences in Georgia."[163] A key part of those experiences was what Toomer termed the "shock of the South."[164] Southern black educators in the 1920s were wary of hiring northerners to teach in southern schools because of culture shock; in general, they thought that northern blacks were unable to adapt to southern racial norms, and made their hiring decisions accordingly.[165]

When Toomer's character, Kabnis, was fired from his teaching position in Sempter, he was the only person in Cane who seemed surprised. As his friend Layman told him,

> Everybody's been expectin that th bust up was comin. Surprised um all y held on as long as y did. Teachin in the South aint th thing fer y. Nassur. You ought t be

---

of 1923 that DuBois wrote the section of the article concerning Toomer. Foley, "Jean Toomer's Sparta," 749.

163 Jean Toomer letter to Kenneth MacGowan, March 15, 1923. Jean Toomer Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University (Box 5, Folder 164).

164 Turner, ed., 123.

165 Crosby, 277. A 1928 article titled "Rural Teachers," published in the journal of an African American agricultural and industrial high school in Maryland, aptly expressed the popular rural view on this subject. The editors wrote, "[t]oo many country districts have been the victims of city-bred and city-trained teachers, meaning well, doubtless, but struggling futilely to make square pegs of preconceived theories fit into the round holes of actual problems. Trained for work 'cut and dried' and intensively supervised, these teachers find themselves thrown on their own resources, under conditions requiring the highest degree of adaptability, conditions frequently calling for almost complete abandonment of theories and methods they have learned to regard as immutable; find themselves in the midst of physical and mental surroundings they have never before met. Is it any wonder that many of them fail? The wonder is that any of them succeed." "Rural Teachers," The Cardinal's Notebook 1.3 (March, 1928): 1.

> way back up North where sometimes I wish I was. But I've hung on down this away so long—[166]

Kabnis could not "hang on" in large part because, for him, the rural context itself inspired fears. Two of the most dramatic instances in Cane occur when Kabnis is alone at night in his cabin and hears noises that terrify him—noises which he initially thinks are from a lynch mob, but later realizes were made by livestock (a chicken in the first instance, and a calf in the second). Kabnis's profound sense of rural dislocation rendered him fearful of country commonplaces, and unable to distinguish between empty and credible threats, real and imaginary phantoms. In Cane, Kabnis's paranoia is justified by the lynching of Tom Burwell, which, though it occurs in the book's first section, is temporally set after Kabnis's visit to Sempter. In the real-life Sparta, where the imminent dangers to local black people in the fall of 1921 were the scourged cotton fields and the very real hunger resulting from a lack of money and work, a failure to successfully navigate the highly personalized world of rural race relations was much more consequential.

Kabnis's out-of-placeness in the country is manifested in Cane not only by his difficulties with the physical surroundings, but also by his awkward social interactions. He does not know how to behave around local whites when he encounters them in town, is terrified by the rock thrown through his friend Halsey's window, and (regardless of how conversant he seems about local gossip and events) lacks the personal relationships to draw on when actually threatened by Hanby, the school principal. Hanby, scandalized by the young teacher's drinking and smoking, plays on Kabnis's obvious fears of white vigalante violence by saying he will call the sheriff if the young man does not tender his resignation and leave school property immediately. Kabnis does not know how to defend himself; his friend Halsey responds in his stead by counter-threatening Hanby—

166 Toomer, Cane, 97.

mentioning both his own good relationship with the sherriff and the fact that the school principal is literally in his debt because of a buggy repair. While Kabnis stands by, mute, Halsey one-ups Hanby's threat to go to the white town leadership by stating his own willingness to personally ambush Hanby and his buggy on a country road if the principal brings harm to Kabnis—a setting where he can do all the damage he wants with no witnesses. If anti-black violence is an imminent and omnipresent part of the physical and cultural landscape of Cane, then there are no personal solutions. If, by contrast, anti-black violence is shaped by personal relationships (such as those between Halsey and Hanby), then knowing how to conform to local standards of behavior and navigate the complex web of interpersonal relationships are the key rural survival skills that Toomer's protagonist lacks.

Although Cane's spectacular anti-black violence negates this historical fact, the supposedly naïve character Kabnis is correct in his assertions that race relations in rural Georgia were better than they appeared from the outside, and that middle class blacks were safer from racist violence than their poorer black neighbors. In contrast with Kabnis, when Toomer himself left Sparta, he apparently did so on good terms—because he promised to fundraise for the Sparta Agricultural and Industrial Institute back in Washington, D.C. But despite this solid relationship, Toomer declined to return to Sparta when his friend Waldo Frank wanted to find a southern setting to help inspire him to work on a book about lynching. As Toomer enigmatically put it in a letter to Frank, he almost had "a serious time" in Sparta, and did not want to go back. Is is unclear whether Toomer knew about and deliberately distorted Sparta's complex race relations, or whether he, like his protagonist Ralph Kabnis, was truly baffled by what he found in that rural community. Regardless, Toomer's fictional rendition of rural Georgia in Cane reduced the racial complexity of the actual place, and substituted proximate stories and

threats for the real and immediate dangers the black community faced. What Toomer succeeded in doing was not what most period critics claimed—an accurate representation of Georgia and the rural South. What the young writer in fact created was a prismatic account of urban perspectives on, fears about, and difficult engagement with rural black experience and identity.

The implications of Toomer's representations of rural life are manifold, but one important consequence of his choice to foreground sensational anti-black violence was the litarary erasure of subtle efforts by African Americans to resist white hegemony, and to create, through institutions such as Sparta A& I and via successful farming and landownership, ever-larger spaces of black autonomy. A second important consequence of Toomer's focus on lynching was that it rendered Cane less capable of illuminating the myriad ways in which symbolic violence characterized black rural life. As Saidiya Hartman noted in Scenes of Subjection, sometimes invocations of the terrible downplay "the terror of the mundane and quotidian," such as racialized displays of public deference, sexual subjugation, and the strategic uses of debt and penal servitude to constrain and control.[167] Although talking about nineteenth-century norms and practices, Hartman's insights about the diffusion of terror via superficially non-violent actions and economic arrangements make great sense when applied to both the literary and the historical twentieth-century rural South. The solutions offered by Sparta A&I's curriculum (including the increased protection from white sexual predation offered by profitable home industries and professional occupations for women and girls; and the in-home production of foodstuffs, clothes, and farm and household furnishings as a means of both avoiding debt and combatting stereotypes about black fiscal improvidence)

167 Saidiya V. Hartman, Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America (New York: Oxford UP, 1997): 4-9.

indicate that many local African Americans took the terrifying circumstances of day-to-day rural life quite seriously. Indeed, they defined those quotidian occurrences as the central problems that they needed to solve. And many individuals were willing to put down their proverbial buckets in Hancock County, in the hopes of quickly and quietly righting those long-established wrongs.

In Toomer's rural South, the long shadow of Tom Burwell obscured not only the subtle acts of rural black resistance to the seemingly less-dire manifestations of white hegemony, but also the ways in which those acts of resistence acquired their very character from the context of domination in which they existed. Absent Toomer's aesthetic experiments with fragmented time and narratives, the young writer would likely have created in Cane an entirely bleak rural world—out of step with the times and on a sure path to destruction as it collided with modern urban life. Toomer believed that country and city life operated under fundamentally different dynamics, and that increased urbanization would inevitably destroy the folk traditions he found so authentically black and so moving—particularly, the spirituals. By contrast, Langston Hughes would soon publish a book of poems that told a very different story about the survival of rural musical forms within the city. In Cane, Toomer affectively argued that you could take both the boy out of the country, and the country out of the boy. In Fine Clothes to the Jew, Hughes would argue that only the former was truly possible, and that the modern city was in part defined by the ways in which it intensified and transformed black rural culture.

Chapter 2. Langston Hughes: The Country and the City

Road, road, road, O!
Road, road…road…road, road!
Road, road, road, O!
On the no'thern road.
These Mississippi towns ain't
Fit fer a hoppin' toad.
—Langston Hughes, "Bound No'th Blues" (1926)

In the summer of 1927, Langston Hughes broke with his practice of spending all his free time in Harlem, and made a road trip through the American South. His trip included a stop at "a backwoods church entertainment given by a magician" in Fort Valley, Georgia; a visit to the old family plantation of fellow writer Jean Toomer in Louisiana; a stay in New Orleans, where he hung out with and collected song lyrics from blues musicians; a Bessie Smith concert in Macon, Georgia, after which he got to meet the singer; and an unexpected crossing-of-paths with Zora Neale Hurston in Mobile, Alabama.[1] Along the way, Hughes also gave readings at Fisk and Tuskegee.

Hughes had originally planned to give additional poetry readings in Texas during his summer trip, but the massive Mississippi River flood of 1927 forced a change in his plans. With 27,000 square miles of seven states under water, all the roads to the Southwest were closed.[2] Hughes tried to detour around the flood in June, but was

1 Emily Bernard, ed. Remember Me To Harlem: The Letters of Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten, 1925-1964 (New York: Knopf, 2001): 53-60.

2 For a period map of the flood and relief efforts, see "Mississippi River Flood of 1927 Showing Flooded Areas and Field of Operations." Retrieved May 12, 2010 from Records of the Coast and Geodetic Survey, RG 23. < http://www.archives.gov/global-

unsuccessful and wound up spending several days in crowded refugee camps in Baton Rouge, talking with displaced rural flood victims, listening to their tales of mistreatment at the hands of white officials, and writing down in his notebook the original blues lyrics he heard.[3] It was a time of both great despair and great hopefulness in the black community, and many rural people (including Tuskegee's principal, Robert Russa Moton) felt that their immediate suffering would ultimately lead to better conditions for black farmers.[4] One popular song in the Delta levee camps claimed "that the flood had washed away the old account," meaning that the debts owed by sharecroppers and tenant farmers to white land owners were now voided by the flood waters, and a post-peonage Southern farm economy would soon emerge.[5]

By the time Hughes collected blues lyrics in the South in the summer of 1927, he had already published two books of poems that were thematically and formally influenced by that new musical form: The Weary Blues in 1926, and Fine Clothes to the Jew, which came out in January of 1927. In the former collection, Hughes used the blues as an organizing theme, and took the radical step of directly quoting blues lyrics. In the latter collection, he invented the blues stanza, in part because he needed a new form to

---

pages/larger-image.html?i=/publications/prologue/2007/spring/images/coast-miss-flood-l.jpg&c=/publications/prologue/2007/spring/images/coast-miss-flood.caption.html>

3 Arnold Rampersad, The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume 1: 1902-1941 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986): 149-50.

4 In the immediate aftermath of the flood, Moton wrote "It is my frank opinion that, as a result of the flood, the position of the Negro as an individual farm owner is going to be considerably strengthened." John M. Barry, Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood and How it Changed America (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997): 383.

5 Barry, 383.

embody the continuing presence of the black countryside in the modern city.[6] Hughes's poems circulated in urban journals and newspapers that enjoyed large circulations and pass-along reading rates in the rural South. His work was also reprinted in small rural publications, such as the Cardinal's Notebook in Maryland, which transformed the poems through context and commentary, and often connected them to specific black rural uplift programs focused on health, education, and agriculture.[7] In Hughes's case, the gaze

---

6 I use the terms "rural" and "country" interchangeably to signal the complexity of the former term, which is often taken to be fixed and precise. In the 1920s, most people embraced the definition of "rural" offered by the Census Office: open countryside and any place with fewer than 2,500 people. The Census Office definition, based on land use patterns and administrative boundaries (municipalities and counties), has since been augmented with socioeconomic measures that evaluate the percentage of the employed population that commutes to and from core counties, and finer-grained labor market definitions that measure "urban" and "rural" at the census tract level (rather than the larger county-level). All three types of measures (administrative, land use, and economic) are currently used and accepted by the U.S. Government. John Cromartie and Shawn Bucholtz, "Defining the 'Rural' in Rural America." Amber Waves (June 2008). 9 September 2010. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/AmberWaves/June08/Features/RuralAmerica.htm.> Although most statistics gathered in the 1920s fail to capture this complexity, it was alive and well in artistic representations of rural life; New Negro artists such as Langston Hughes explored the slippages between country and city, urban and rural, and made that complexity a generative force in their work.

7 In a 1928 letter written from Magazine, Alabama, Zora Neale Hurston noted that she was circulating Hughes's poems from Fine Clothes to the Jew in her ethnographic work in the rural South—which precipitated diverse oral cultural responses: "In every town I hold 1 or 2 story-telling contests, and at each I begin by telling them who you are and all, hen I read poems from 'Fine Clothes'. Boy! they eat it up. Two or three of them are too subtle and they dont get it. 'Mulatto' for instance and 'Sport' but the others they just eat up. You are being quoted in R.R. camps, phosphate mines, Turpentine stills etc." Hurston went on to recount a card game in which the players quoted Hughes's blues stanzas and improvisationson them to taunt each other, and an evening when two local musicians brought guitars and sang the whole book, urging the listeners to sing along. Hurston reflected, "So you see they are making it so much a part of themselves they go to improvising on it." Carla Kaplan, ed. Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters (New York: Anchor Books, 2003): 121-2.

between rural reader and urban poet was reciprocal. Rural readers looked to him for new ways of thinking about and representing the country, and Hughes looked to rural songs for ways to represent city life and black migration in all their complexity and diversity. Rural influences on Hughes were both formal (in the case of the blues poems), and personal—in the case of Hughes's 1927 trip to the South and the change in perspective it brought.

A dialogic connection existed between urban and rural which animated much New Negro art, and Hughes's poetry was no exception. The poet depicted rural migrants in Fine Clothes, both en route to and in New York. But his trip South later on in 1927 was important because it changed his perceptions of the region and its inhabitants. Hughes's time in the rural South may have opened him up to writing more laudatory depictions of black rural life, as he realized that much of what he knew about the region came from books and was just plain wrong—particularly on the issue of joy. "It seemed rather shameless to be colored and poor and happy down there at the same time," he wrote several weeks later to Alain Locke, "[b]ut most of the Negroes seemed to be having a grand time and one couldn't help but like them."[8] In an era in which the popular culture was still dominated by minstrel stereotypes of happy and childlike poor black southerners, Hughes clearly went to the rural South prepared to find every aspect of those representations to be false. What he found instead was that the more sober literary portraits of southern black life were also flawed and misleading—albeit in different ways. His personal epiphany about the complexity of black rural life surprised the young writer, but the essays and poems (particularly his blues poems) written by Hughes over the previous several years had already been implicitly exploring the nuances of the urban-

8 October 8, 1927 letter from Hughes to Alain Locke, quoted in Rampersad, The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume 1, 153.

rural interface, and making bold claims about the hybrid character of the modern black city and its inhabitants. And during roughly this same period, when Hughes was creating a space for the rural in the black culture capital of Harlem, rural readers were appropriating his poems about city life to help define a modern rural New Negro identity.

THE NEGRO ARTIST AND THE RURAL MOUNTAIN

Hughes's exploration of rural cultural influences arguably began with an essay he wrote while himself a resident of rural Chester County, Pennsylvania. The year before his trip South, while working on his second book of poems, Hughes published a creative manifesto that sent shock waves through the world of African American letters. "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" is typically read for its discussion of race and class; my contention is that the essay is also key to understanding how Hughes used race and class to frame important questions about geography and black regional identity. The essay called out the black middle class in general, and fellow poet Countee Cullen in particular, for stifling black creative expression by aping white culture and norms. Hughes identified the saving grace and source of black creative vitality not as the elite "talented tenth" lauded by W.E.B. Du Bois, but rather as:

> the low-down folks, the so-called common element, and they are the majority—may the Lord be praised!....They live on Seventh Street in Washington or State Street in Chicago and they do not particularly care whether they are like white folks or anybody else.[9]

Hughes's 1926 manifesto talked a great deal about the central role of irony in black expression (particularly in the blues), but one unintended irony was that his "Negro Artist" essay's typical Negro was either northern or midwestern and urban, whereas in the 1920s the majority of the black population still lived in the rural South. In one sense

9 Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," The Nation (June 1926): 41. Hereafter referred to as "Negro Artist."

this is not surprising—Hughes valued personal experience in writing,[10] and although he had spent time on his father's ranch in rural Toluca, Mexico, he was fundamentally an urbanite. He grew up in various cities in Kansas, Illinois and Ohio, briefly attended Columbia University, and moved back to New York City after stints in Washington, D.C. and Paris, and four months working onboard a steamship that traded at port cities along the west coast of Africa.[11]

In 1926, when his "Negro Artist" essay and first book came out, and when he submitted his second book for publication, Hughes was a student at Lincoln University, a black college in rural Pennsylvania about thirty-five miles southwest of Philadelphia. During his college years, Hughes had this in common with the rest of the rural black majority: he too had to rely on the mail, and urban acquaintances, to stay up-to-date on the literary goings-on in New York. Although geographically isolated, Lincoln afforded Hughes a unique chance to stay connected to urban life by bringing speakers such as Alain Locke and V. F. Calverton to campus. Hughes's friends also worked to help stem the cultural isolation he sometimes felt. Even the cosmopolitan Carl Van Vechten came via limousine to visit, and tried to amuse the young poet by catching him up on the goings-on and gossip in the New York entertainment scene.

The post also brought important news to campus—including the letter that inspired "Negro Artist." In the spring of 1926, while Hughes was taking his final exams, the editor of The Nation sent him proofs of the forthcoming essay "The Negro-Art Hokum," in the hopes that he would respond to George Schuyler's claims and make "an

---

10 "Most of my own poems are racial in theme and treatment, derived from the life I know." Hughes, "Negro Artist," 42.

11 Arnold Rampersad, ed. The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes (New York: Vintage Classics, 1995): 8-9.

independent positive statement of the case for a true Negro racial art."[12] Hughes took the bait, and spent part of finals week writing his essay for the journal. Like many other texts now held to be central to the Harlem Renaissance, "Negro Artist" was written in rural space; the circumstances of its composition (the physical distance from New York) perhaps gave Hughes a unique critical perspective on art, race, and urban life. At least one friend thought that rural isolation was good for Hughes, and offered him the summer use of a cabin in the woods near Indianapolis. But Hughes turned that offer down, in part because he feared the Klan, and opted instead to return to Manhattan.[13]

Although Hughes considered Lincoln wonderful, and described it as "more like what home ought to be than any place I've ever seen," the young poet spent most of his school vacations back in New York—a city that was being rapidly and radically transformed by an unprecedented influx of black people from multiple locations both within and outside the United States.[14] The black population of New York City had increased 66.9% between 1910 and 1920, to 153,088.[15] And as W.A. Domingo noted in his 1925 essay in The New Negro anthology, approximately 20% of the black population in Manhattan was foreign-born according to the 1920 census.[16] Southern migrants, many with family ties to rural communities, also poured into Harlem and made their mark on the "Negro culture capital,"[17] and contemporary magazines were replete with articles

---

12 Rampersad, The Life of Langston Hughes, Vol. 1, 130.

13 Rampersad, The Life of Langston Hughes, Vol. 1, 130-1.

14 Rampersad, The Life of Langston Hughes, Vol. 1, 127.

15 H. Donald Henderson, "The Statistics of Migration." The Journal of Negro History 6.4 (Oct.ober 1921): 481.

[16]16 W.A. Domingo, "Gift of the Black Tropics." Alain Locke, ed. The New Negro (reprint of the 1925 edition). (New York: Touchstone, 1997): 341-2.

17 The scope of the migration was significant enough that the Journal of Negro History devoted thirteen pages to statistical summaries of 1920 population data as soon as

advising these rural newcomers about how to behave in the big city.[18] Although Hughes wrote a significant number of poems about the experiences of southern migrants, the fundamental conflict he identified in African American letters was not between North and South, or rural and urban, but rather about class—the middle versus the lower class, respectable versus folk culture. However, as I will demonstrate, the term "folk" contained an implicit dialog between urban and rural, which meant that the young poet's discussions of class were also discussions of geography.

Although he had an education and social connections that allowed him to claim middle class status in the black community, as his essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" vociferously indicated, Hughes's loyalties were elsewhere. Hughes was able to affiliate this way because "middle class" in urban black communities in the 1920s was a complex designation that had to do as much with comportment and respectability as it did with occupation and income. As Martin Summers notes, because of circumscribed opportunities for economic advancement, the black middle class defined itself in large part "by its self-conscious positioning against the black working class—through its adherence to a specific set of social values and public performances of those

---

the advanced census data was released in 1921. Author H. Donald Henderson wrote, "The apparent effect of the migration in the light of the advanced reports of the census of 1920 has been the movement of the Negro population from the southern cities to the northern industrial centers, while there was going on at the same time a movement of the rural Negro population from the rural districts in the South into the thus depleted southern cities to take the places of those migrating to the North. Statistics show, therefore, a small increase or stability in the cities of the South, whereas the Negro population of the State increased less, remained about the same, or decidedly decreased" p. 471. H. Donald Henderson, "The Statistics of Migration." The Journal of Negro History 6.4 (October 1921): 471-484.

18 Half Century magazine was founded for the explicit purpose of helping women readers acclimate to urban life. See Noliwe Rooks, Ladies' Pages: African American Women's Magazines and the Culture that Made Them (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

values."[19]Despite the fact that middle class blacks claimed Hughes as one of their own, he viewed that claim as specious and artificial, in part because it singled him out of his family. He related this position in a thinly-veiled autobiographical anecdote in his 1926 essay:

> I know a young colored writer, a manual worker by day, who had been writing well for the colored magazines for some years, but it was not until he recently broke into the white publications and his first book was accepted by a prominent New York publisher that the "best" Negros in his city took the trouble to discover that he lived there. Then almost immediately they decided to give a grand dinner for him. But the society ladies were careful to whisper to his mother that perhaps she'd better not come. They were not sure she would have an evening gown.[20]

The black middle-class could claim Hughes all it wanted; he wouldn't claim them back, and would devote significant creative energy to promoting working-class culture and values.

Hughes used the term "folk" to designate black working-class people generally, but, as David Nicholls pointed out, by the mid-1920s the word also implied a rural connection:

> The practice of conjuring up an African-American folk thus produced a compelling vision of collective origins for metropolitan African Americans. As

---

19 Martin Summers, Manliness and its Discontents (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2004): 6. Summers noted that, in the first three decades of the twentieth century, middle-class notions of black male identity were in transition from a model of "manliness" (based on Victorian constructions of respectability) to a more modern notion of "masculinity"—a category that was "not dependent upon one's relationship to the marketplace, that did not rely upon a patriarchal and hetero-normative posture, and that revolved around consumption and the body" (6). He identified Hughes and other Harlem Renaissance artists such as Wallace Thurman as part of the middle class based on education and the broadened career options their creative talents afforded (149-158). Although Hughes and Thurman objected to the middle-class label, Summers positioned their critiques of bourgeois manners and mores as part of a redefinition from the inside-out of black middle-class male identity.

20 Hughes, "Negro Artist," 42.

> millions of black Americans left agricultural settings to pursue employment in urban centers, the folk seemed an appropriate term to describe these masses of former sharecroppers and farmhands who were moving across the landscape.[21]

Hughes's focus on class led him to write about working class life and the blues. He might not have been setting out to write about rural experience in 1926, but many of the working class people he wrote about were recent migrants from rural America who brought country culture to the city. [22] The dialogue between urban and rural implicit in the term "folk" mirrored some of the formal connections that Hughes forged in his contemporaneous blues poems. As with the term "middle class," the terms "urban" and "rural" are in some ways similarly malleable and complex designations in the interwar period. A recent migrant to Harlem who to census enumerators would be considered urban in 1926 was culturally a palimpsest of all his or her previous life experiences, most of which occurred in rural America. Further, Hughes's use of "folk" to describe city dwellers presented the possibility of an aspirational black urban migration that had nothing to do with middle class aping—the possibility of a mass movement to cities without the desire to conform to urban middle class ideals of comportment, culture, and upward mobility.

---

21 Nicholls, 3.

22 Laurie Green has argued the continuity of southern urban and rural spaces in the civil rights era, noting that "even as they migrated away from the cotton fields to northern and southern cities, working-class African Americans compared and contrasted the racial parameters of city life to cultural memories of the plantation." Green, Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2007): 5. Green has documented how 1950s and 1960s black migrants drew on their experiences in and cultural memories of rural agricultural life for a vocabulary to talk about and challenge urban racism. My dissertation is in part an exploration of the extent to which this cultural pattern was already true in the 1920s, although, unlike Green, I focus on the meanings of rural representations in the realm of art.

RACE, PLACE AND THE BLUES

Like many city dwellers in the 1920s, the blues itself was a recent rural transplant. Just as the rural people who moved to cities had to adapt to their new urban environments, so to were the blues changing through exposure to new urban performance contexts, and changing also from their broader circulation—enabled by new recording technology that brought the newly "citified" recorded blues back to the country on shellac- or celluloid-coated discs bearing the names of music labels such as Black Swan, Paramount, Okeh, Columbia, and Vocalion.[23] In 1926, Hughes was in the process of transforming the musical blues— then newly-hybrid, a rural-urban musical mélange— into a written literary form. And the push and pull between rural and urban formal influences manifested itself in the blues stanzas he ultimately created.

In one of the earliest academic pieces on the blues and literature, Sterling Brown defined the musical blues as a kind of lyric poetry:

---

23 The widescale distribution of black recording artists was a radical departure from the post-World War I status quo. As David Suisman noted, "[t]he music industries were not an equal opportunity employer....Despite the disarming popularity of the singer-comedian Bert Williams, the nation's widespread (though not universal) embrace of ragtime, and the popular acclaim for the bandleader James Reese Europe, African Americans found their opportunities in the music industries tightly restricted. While phonograph manufacturers appealed to immigrant groups by issuing hundreds of titles in every language from Czech to Chinese, they all but refused to issue records by African Americans and paid no attention to African American consumers. When African Americans did make records, the recordings were limited to comedy or novelty styles, which established 'coon songs' and minstrelsy as the paradigm of African American culture within the industry. (Coon songs were a popular style of comic songs based on caricatures of Negro life, usually sung in 'dialect.') Minor exceptions to the pattern...did nothing to alter the industry's low valuation of African American talent, its reluctance to depict African Americans as performers of so-called quality music, or its general pattern of marginalizing or excluding African American musicians." David Suisman, "Workers in the Kingdom of Culture: Black Swan Records and the Political Economy of African American Music." The Journal of American History 90.4 (March, 2004): 1296.

> The blues appealed as something different, not only in chordal progression and scalar structure, but also in verse form.
>
> > If you ever been down, you know just how I feel,
> > Ever been down, babe, you know just how I feel
> > Like a broken down engine, not no driving wheel.
>
> ....The earlier blues referred more often to the rural way of life:
>
> > If I could holler like a mountain jack
> > I'd go up on the mountain and call my baby back.
> > I wish I was a catfish swimmin' in de sea
> > I'd have all you women fishing after me.
>
> Blues told of cotton planting, the boll weevil, used barnyard fables and similes, and occasionally groused at the hard times.[24]

By 1926, there were important differences between rural blues and the new blues music performed in cities. Variously termed "folk blues" or "country blues," the rural musical form was characterized by solo singer-songwriters accompanying themselves on guitar, whereas the "classic blues" (often termed "city blues" or "vaudeville blues") was "written mainly by male songwriters and performed exclusively by female singers drawn from the professional vaudeville stage, usually accompanied by a small jazz band or pianist."[25] Folk blues songs tended to be more fluid in stanza and song length than their urban counterparts, which tended toward a standard 12-bar form. Also unlike their urban counterparts, "the down-home musicians...sang the blues in a context unfettered by the wishes of white record executives and the limitations of the three-minute recording."[26]

---

24 Sterling Brown "The Blues," Phylon Vol. 13.4 (1952): 287-9.

25 Alona Sagee, ""Bessie Smith, 'Down Hearted Blues' and 'Gulf Coast Blues' Revisited," Popular Music 26.1 (2007): 118.

26 Jon Michael Spencer, "The Diminishing Rural Residue of Folklore in City and Urban Blues, Chicago 1915-1950," Black Music Research Journal 12.1 (Spring 1992): 28.

The particular way that blues singers had the blues—their words, syntax, imagery, structure, lyric or narrative style, and phrasing—all told a story about where they were from, and where their creative affiliations lay. So too did Langston Hughes's blues poetry of the 1920s. Hughes produced blues poems that resembled the cutting-edge vaudeville lyrics being developed in cities. But he also crafted blues stanzas that bore closer resemblance to rural blues, as well as hybrid stanzas that borrowed formal strategies from both rural and urban musical traditions.[27] And he did all this during a period when a color line was being drawn in southern music; new links between race, region, and style reduced what in practice was a "fluid complex of sounds and styles" into what Karl Miller described as "a series of distinct genres associated with [racial] identities," with the blues identified as both African American and distinct from the "country" music played by rural white southerners.[28] Hughes was part of this widespread effort to racialize the blues, and to distinguish black culture from white, but the young poet also used those new generic distinctions to forge creative connections between South and North, and between rural and urban black culture.

Before he wrote Fine Clothes to the Jew, the work in which he created a poetic form for the blues sensibility nascent in The Weary Blues,[29] Hughes lauded the blues's

---

27 My thesis about rural influence runs counter to that of Steven Tracy, whose 1988 book Langston Hughes and the Blues provides the most comprehensive analysis of Hughes's blues poems and musical influences. Scholarly consensus seems to support Tracy, though there is at least one published article that takes him to task on this question of rural influence: David Chinitz's "Literacy and Authenticity: The Blues Poems of Langston Hughes" Callaloo 19. 1 (Winter 1996): 177-192).

28 Karl Hagstrom Miller, Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow (Durham: Duke UP, 2010): 2.

29 Despite its title, The Weary Blues was not the place that Hughes most elegantly and completely articulated his new blues aesthetic. Arnold Rampersad argued that Fine Clothes to the Jew is Hughes's best collection of verse largely because of his invention and deployment in this book of the blues poem form. Rampersad wrote,

capacity to encompass both northern and southern experiences within a single song. In a 1925 letter to his friend Carl Van Vechten, Hughes wrote about singer Bessie Smith's 1923 hit "Gulf Coast Blues":

> In the Gulf Coast Blues one can feel the cold northern snows, the memory of the melancholy mists of the Louisiana low-lands, the shack that is home, the worthless lovers with hands full of gimme, mouths full of much oblige, the eternal unsatisfied longings.[30]

Hughes was interested in the artistic joining of distant places as well as the bringing together of past and present. And although the words "North" and "South" were sometimes used in 1920s literature as shorthand for "urban present" and "rural plantation past," Hughes's associations were more nuanced.[31] He noted the southern past in Bessie

---

"despite its failure to gain recognition, Fine Clothes to the Jew may stand in relationship to black American poetry in a way not unlike Walt Whitman's 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass stands in relationship to white American poetry, or to the poetry of the nation as a whole....In the other work, Hughes writes—in spite of his concern with race—as a poet impelled by the literary tradition as defined by certain major poets of the language—in particular, Walt Whitman and his epigones, notably Carl Sandburg and Vachel Lindsay. But in Fine Clothes Hughes attempted to work in a way no black or white poet had ever attempted to work: deliberately defining poetic tradition according to the standards of a group often seen as sub-poetic—the black masses....at the center of his effort would be the recognition of a link between poetry and black music, and in particular the music not of the dignified and Europeanized spirituals, so often lauded, but of the earthy, almost 'unspeakable' blues." Arnold Rampersad, "Langston Hughes's Fine Clothes to the Jew" Callaloo 26 (Winter 1986): 144-6.

30 Emily Bernard, ed. Remember Me to Harlem, 12. Rather than transcribing the "Gulf Coast Blues" lyrics here—a fraught enterprise because of the difficulties of capturing the nuances of Bessie Smith's vocal performance that so moved Hughes—I would direct readers to Alona Sagee's analysis of Smith's vocal performance, which includes both a musical transcription and lyrics: "Bessie Smith, 'Down Hearted Blues' and 'Gulf Coast Blues' Revisited," Popular Music 26.1 (2007): 117-127.

31 As Farrah Griffin argues in her study of African American migration narratives, a defining characteristic of the Great Migration era was the fact that nuanced depictions of North and South were in conversation with starker portraits of place, and artists such as Ralph Ellison combined elements of both in his fiction and essays. Farrah

Smith's song, but Hughes joined the past "melancholy" of southern Louisiana with the present travails of the North (physical cold, poor lodgings, and worthless lovers) under the same category of "eternal unsatisfied longings." The designation of past versus present, North versus South, was clearly less striking to Hughes than the representation of a black lament shared across the American landscape.

Hughes's conception of the blues lament may have been geographically inclusive, but it was racially quite specific. In Hughes's writings, the blues was a vital part of black experience—a view consistent with the mainstream music industry's presentation of the genre.[32] In "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Hughes identified the blues sensibility as part of a wellspring of black creativity that was being squandered as a result of black middle-class prudery. This creativity was of African origins, "the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile."[33] Hughes's words transported the African musical instrument

---

Griffin, "Who Set You Flowin'?" The African American Migration Narrative (New York: Oxford UP, 1995).

32 The irony is that, despite the fact that blues in the 1920s was marketed as, and popularly understood to be, "Negro" music, when the pioneering black-run Race record label Black Swan surreptitiously integrated their catalog in 1921 and started reissuing recordings of white artists under generic pseudonyms, no-one noticed. As David Suisman noted, "there were no indignant editorials, no boycotts, no leters of protest. The silence suggests that people either did not care our could not percieve any difference. Racial difference was not audible; rather, it was artificially and arbitrarily assigned." Suisman, 1320. Karl Hagstrom Miller and others support Suisman's findings about the arbitrary racial marking of early blues music.

33 Langston Hughes, "Negro Artist," 43. Hughes was explicitly talking about jazz in this sentence, but he both associated and conflated jazz and blues throughout this essay. His description of jazz' "joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile" is a near paraphrase of his earlier comment about the "incongruous humor that so often, as in the blues, becomes ironic laughter mixed with tears" (41). On the same page of the essay, Hughes also linked the sounds of jazz bands and blues vocals as part of a common

into the heart of 1920s black urban life, a move that was consistent with what Alain Locke and other prominent New Negro intellectuals were claiming about cultural continuity between Africa and African America. As Locke argued in his 1925 essay "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts," despite the profound material and cultural disruptions of slavery, "the American Negro brought over as an emotional inheritance a deep-seated aesthetic endowment" from Africa that continued to be legible in contemporary creative work.[34] One lament that many of Hughes's poetic speakers from the 1920s shared—the hard-boiled urbanites as well as the recent migrants from the rural South—was the experience of alienation from the city itself. In a poem from The Weary Blues, Hughes characterized this lament as a timeless fear shared with rural African ancestors:

Afraid

We cry among the skyscrapers
As our ancestors
Cried among the palms in Africa
Because we are alone,
It is night,
And we're afraid.[35]

The painful sense of isolation Hughes depicts through the tears in "Afraid" is not an exclusive product of the contemporary urban environment; "our ancestors" were similarly dwarfed under the tall palm trees in rural Africa. At a time when urban exceptionalism was in vogue, and many authors focused on the distinct personal transformations created

---

resistance to middle-class closed mindedness: "Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near-intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand." (43).

34 Locke, The New Negro, 154.

35 Arnold Rampersad noted that the poem was first published in Crisis (November 1924) and later in The Weary Blues "with slight changes in punctuation." The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes (New York: Vintage Classics, 1995): 41, 624.

by city life, Hughes had a different conception of what place meant to individuals. The city does not produce a new kind of emotional response in black people, according to Hughes; it elicits a familiar old response—perhaps as old as African civilization itself.[36]

By 1927, Africa was much more than a convenient symbol to connect African American rural and urban experience and history, and Hughes was one of a number of New Negro thinkers for whom emotional, aesthetic, and material connections with the continent were important. Henry Sylvester Williams, from Trinidad, organized the 1900 conference in London that coined the term "Pan-African" to designate the transnational movement that opposed Anglo colonialism and connected the political, economic, and spiritual futures of people of African descent throughout the diaspora. W. E. B. Du Bois, who attended the 1900 conference in London, organized the Pan-African Congress in 1919—a meeting that attracted 57 delegates from 15 countries, and was covered extensively by the American black press. Three more Pan-African Congresses were held in the 1920s in cities around the world, and focused on such issues as lynching in the United States, home rule in British West Africa and the British West Indies, and the economic exploitation of the black majorities in Kenya, Rhodesia and South Africa. Pan-Africanism had adherants across the African American political spectrum, and was championed in various ways by both urban and rural people. A central platform of Marcus Garvey's controversial Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) was the Back-to-Africa movement, and its claim for "the black man's natural right to and

36 There is no black Baudelairian flanneur in Hughes's poetic lexicon, no new black urban identity, but rather a knitting together of urban and rural experience into a common story of blackness.

attachment to Africa."[37] Following in the footsteps of Baptist and African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church leaders such as Bishop Henry McNeal Turner (who began to champion black missionary work in, and emigration to, Africa during Reconstruction), the UNIA's advocacy for black emigration to Liberia and other African countries was extremely popular among black farmers in the South, who made up the majority of the UNIA's membership in the 1920s.[38] Although the more mainstream Booker T. Washington did not advocate emigration, he was actively involved with educational and agricultural exchanges with Africa and the Caribbean as early as 1900, and in 1912 organized an international conference at Tuskegee "[t]o bring together...students of colonial and racial questions," as well as missionaries, teachers, and government officials who were "actually engaged in any way in practical and constructive work, which seeks to build up Africa."[39] By stressing contuinuities in black emotional experience, Hughes used the blues to advocate Pan-Africanism and to symbolically connect urban and rural locales.

But although the emotion of the blues was the same across time and place, there were particularities about the experience of black southern migration, and the resulting alienation, that Hughes suggested were both distinctive and harbingers of the future—most notably in his 1923 poem "The Little Frightened Child":

A little Southern colored child
Comes to a Northern school

---

37 Mary Rolinson, Grassroots Garveyism: The Universal Negro Improvement Association in the Rural South, 1920-1927 (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2007): 26.

38 Rolinson, 26-38.

39 Rolinson, 25-6, 39. For a discussion of Tuskeggee as a site of diaspora, see Frank Guridy, Forging Diaspora: Afro-Cubans and African Americans in a World of Empire and Jim Crow (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2010): 17-60.

And is afraid to play
With the white children.

At first they are nice to him,
But finally they taunt him
And call him "nigger."

The colored children
Hate him, too,
After awhile.

He is a little dark boy
With a round black face
And a white embroidered collar.

Concerning this
Little frightened child
One might make a story
Charting tomorrow.[40]

In its final stanza, "The Little Frightened Child" suggests through speculation that this boy's experience may be important as a measure the future. "One might make a story/Charting tomorrow," the speaker states in the detached formal diction that characterizes the poem as a whole. But before this final suggestion about larger meaning, the poem pans in on the boy himself—describing his face ("black" and "round") and the collar framing it ("white" and "embroidered"), and thereby calling attention to his physical distinctiveness. In a poem that hitherto has been dominated by explicit actions

40 In 1947, Langston Hughes republished his 1923 poem "The Little Frightened Child" with the new title "Migration." The same final two stanzas mean different things in 1947 and 1923. The title of the 1923 version, "The Little Frightened Child," immediately tells us that a particular child is the subject of this poem; the surprise at the end of the poem is that this individual migrant boy's story might have larger social meaning. The "Little Frightened Child" version of this poem asserts importance of this boy's experience long before historical hindsight (and the bulk of the Great Migration) were established facts to vindicate Hughes's focus. For the different versions of the poem and notes on its publication history, see Arnold Rampersad, ed. The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes, 36, 623, 280.

(the arrival at the new school, the refusal to play, the initial kindness that turns to taunts and hatred), in the fourth stanza it is the implicit actions that are important: the way the reader is asked to gaze at this boy and notice that someone has carefully laundered and embellished his clothes.[41] The fact that someone else cares for him subtly suggests to readers that he is worth caring about—before the final pronouncement of the speaker about the potential wider import of the boy's migration experience. Just as the poem "Afraid" repeats the key word "afraid" in its final line, so does "The Little Frightened Child" repeat the words "frightened child" in its final stanza. Both poems deal with alienation in an urban environment, though the latter locates the experience of fear more precisely in space, time and circumstance: the initial experiences of a child in a new city in the American North, during the era of Jim Crow segregation, as the novelty of that child's presence among his more cosmopolitan schoolmates wears off.

Black urban migration in the 1920s was a complicated business. Although some rural people boarded a train and moved directly from country to city, many others migrated in waves—from country to small town, to big town, to small city, and finally to a big city.[42] Others moved back and forth between the country and the city, splitting their

---

41 Michele Mitchell, in Righteous Propagation, argued that there was a "turn toward domesticity on the part of early-twentieth-century African Americans" of all social classes that "was, in many regards, a surrogate for electoral politics in their quest for self-determination." The care and physical presentation of children was seen by many African Americans as part of a broader strategy for "race betterment," and a response to the eugenisict underpinnings of many mainstream "better babies" initiatives that were popular in rural America. So something as superficially innocuous as the embroidery on a child's clean shirt might signal a family's aspirations to racial equality as well as class advancement. Michele Mitchell, Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2004): 36.

42 Louis Kyriakoudes, in his study of black migration to Nashville, presents Samuel Dean as a prototypical example of the complex rural-urban migration patterns of African Americans in the early 20th century. Dean was born to a wheat sharecropping

time based on crop cycles and the need for temporary agricultural and urban labor. Jennifer Ritterhouse notes that around September 15th of every year in the interwar period, a significant number of black domestic servants in Athens, Georgia "left their jobs to make better money picking cotton in the fields outside of town,"[43] and Laurie Green explores the porousness of the urban-rural divide in the 1940s, documenting the dramatic state-coordinated transportation of day laborers from Memphis into the cotton fields in Arkansas.[44] This practice of black urbanites of periodically returning to the country to perform agricultural labor was well-established by the 1920s. Thad Sitton and James Conrad note the particularly tenacious pull home of "freedom colonies," rural

---

family in Bedford County, Tennessee: "Dean left his family home...as soon as he reached adulthood. Heading first to the county seat of Shelbyville but 'lookin' for better all the time,' Dean soon moved to Nashville, where he worked in a feed mill. He punctuated his stay in Nashville with a stint in the meatpacking plants of St. Louis, followed by a brief foray to Akron, Ohio, during World War I, each time returning to Nashville. Dean's experience is representative of the heavy out-migration from rural Tennessee that commenced in earnest in the early years of this century, well before the onset of the Great Migration in 1916....This migration was dominated by young adults between the ages of fifteen and thirty-four who, like Dean, saw that the region's agriculture offered only a hardscrabble future." Louis M. Kyriakoudes, "Southern Black Rural-Urban Migration in the Era of the Great Migration: Nashville and Middle Tennessee, 1890-1930," Agricultural History 72.2 (Spring, 1998): 364.

43 Jennifer Ritterhouse, Growing Up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2006): 181.

44 Laurie Green detailed how long-established patterns of seasonal work in both locales came under joint control of the Memphis mayor's office, the Tennessee State Employment Service, and the United States Employment Service, who together coordinated "the transportation of laborers across the Mississippi River to Arkansas. A TSES administrator, after witnessing one morning's roundup near the Harahan Bridge together with U.S. Agriculture Department observers in the 1940s, reported that 'all parties were greatly impressed with the unusual spectacle that does not exist in any other city in the country—some 15,000 workers leaving within a short space of time every morning to pick cotton.'" Green, Battling the Plantation Mentality, 26. The precedent of temporary black migrant agricultural work was long-established; the spectacle was in the scale and formal control of the Harahan Bridge transport.

settlements established by free blacks during and after slavery. Freedom colony residents in 1920s Texas who lived within 10 miles of towns and cities (depending on the condition of roads) would regularly pedal agricultural products there. Family members who moved away in search of employment often returned home for reunions and church events each year: "Sons and daughters born in the city made summer visits to country cousins, uncles, and aunts, and sometimes the country cousins made reciprocal visits," often traveling from cities as distant as Oakland and Chicago.[45] Homecoming was one indication of the close connections between rural and urban life, but working class and middle class blacks also routinely moved between country and city in the 1920s, following seasonal work cycles. The July 30, 1922 issue of the Fresno Morning Republican ran an article about a freedom colony established in 1908, "Allensworth Unique Town: Negroes Develop Fine Farming District," and noted that the distinguished wife of the late founder "resides in Los Angeles and spends the winter months in the colony." Winter was the time for socializing, after the hard work of harvesting was over—a time for the urban elite to come and enjoy country life. Summer was the time when all the permanent residents of Allensworth (women and children included) and migrant agricultural laborers were busy with farm work.[46]

Hughes's migrant characters mirror the complexity of real-life black migration in the 1920s. They are not stock characters, rural "hayseeds" dropped into an urban mélange, but something more complicated. The boy in Hughes's "The Little Frightened Child" is not clearly from a rural background, although the embroidery on his collar

---

45 Thad Sitton and James H. Conrad, Freedom Colonies: Independent Black Texans in the Time of Jim Crow (Austin: U of Texas P, 2005): 147, 173.

46 Alice C. Royal, Allensworth, the Freedom Colony: A California African American Township (Berkeley, CA: Heyday P, 2008): 59.

suggests a close family connection to folk sewing traditions rather than to the world of ready-to-wear manufactured garments beginning to come into vogue in America through urban department stores.[47] Neither do two of the laments of southern migrants in the urban North ("Po' Boy Blues" and "Homesick Blues") in Fine Clothes contain explicit thematic statements about a rural past for their speakers. Rather, the poems contain more subtle hints and signals via imagery, diction, form and structure that tell the nuanced stories of their speakers' rural affiliations. Together, they paint a picture of the working-class country culture that Hughes claimed as a key part of black urban creative experience.

---

47 Such subtle material folk connections could have deep meaning. Booker T. Washington presented his mother's decision to sew him a cap for school (rather than to spend money on a store-bought version) as a formative moral choice in Chapter Two of Up From Slavery: "I found that all the other children wore caps or hats on their heads, and I had neither....As usual, I put the case before my mother, and she explained to me that she had no money with which to buy a 'store hat,' which was a rather new institution at that time among the members of my race and was considered quite the thing for young and old to own one, but that she would find a way to help me out of the difficulty. She accordingly got two pieces of 'homespun' (jeans) and sewed them together, and I was soon the proud possessor of my first cap. The lesson that my mother taught me in this has always remained with me, and I have tried as best I could to teach it to others. I have always felt proud, whenever I think of the incident, that my mother had strength of character enough not to be fed into the temptation of seeming to be that which she was not—of trying to impress my schoolmates and others with the fact that she was able to buy me a 'store hat' when she was not. I have always felt pround that she refused to go into febt for that which she did not have the money to pay for. Since that time I have owned many kinds of caps and hats, but never one of which I have felt so proud of as of the cap made of the two pieces of cloth sewed together by my mother. I have noted the fact, but without satisfaction...that several of the boys who began their careers with 'store hats' and who were my schoolmates and used to join in the sport that was made of me because I had only a 'homespun' cap, have ended their careers in the penitentiary, while others are not able now to buy any kind of hat."Booker T. Washington, Up From Slavery, reprinted in Three Negro Classics (New York: Avon Books, 1965): 46-7.

GENRE AND ANALOGY

Rural and urban musical blues forms are often less tidy than categories we use to talk about them; in order to use those categories and make them significant, Hughes needed to devise in poetry a whole range of formal and technical analogies to musical practice. The musical blues seemed to have sprung fully formed onto the urban scene in the 1920s, but Hughes's blues stanza was less like Athena. Like the gradual urban migrations of many rural African Americans, Hughes progressed gradually towards poems that successfully conveyed the shape and feeling of rural blues songs.

The poet experimented anxiously before he was able to create poems about the migrant experience such as "Bound No'th Blues," "Po' Boy Blues" and "Homesick Blues" that embodied the moods, themes, rhythms, and structures of the musical blues. Arnold Rampersad described a progression "in stages" to the mature blues poems in Fine Clothes to the Jew, and noted as key steps Hughes's positive reclamation of black dialect in "Mother to Son" (1923), his "barely mediated" representations of black speech in "Prayer Meeting" (1922-3), and the pivotal poem "The Weary Blues" (1923), in which Hughes first established a connection between the blues musician and the speaker of the poem—and then, more radically, allowed "the black bluesman to sing his song, with minimal interference from conventional white poetic values."[48] The final stanza of the latter poem reads as follows:

> Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.
> He played a few chords then he sang some more—
> "I got the Weary Blues

48 Arnold Rampersad, "Langston Hughes's Fine Clothes to the Jew." Callaloo 26 (Winter, 1986): 146-7. To Rampersad's progression I would add the sustained gaze on the child at the end of "The Little Frightened Child," as it also anticipated Hughes's valorization of the individual black subject through use of the first person in his blues poems.

And I can't be satisfied.
Got the Weary Blues
And I can't be satisfied—
I ain't happy no mo'
And I wish that I had died."
And far into the night he crooned that tune.
The stars went out and so did the moon.
The singer stopped playing and went to bed
While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.
He slept like a rock or a man that's dead.

The inclusion of the bluesman's song was pivotal because Hughes was en route to creating an enduring blues poetry that was structured like the 1920s musical blues: a first-person lyric poetic stanza, with the pacing of eight- or twelve-bar musical blues, complete with full line repetitions and AAA or AAB rhyme schemes.[49]

Although there is a degree of shared vocabulary and imagery between music and poetry, borrowings across the genres are rarely simple because the creative forms are not exact analogues. In African American literature, W.E.B. Du Bois's musical epigraphs in The Souls of Black Folk announced emphatically in 1903 that black folk music was a legitimate participant in African American letters. But what Du Bois did was quote (or reference) spirituals, rather than try to create a new kind of writing that was like a spiritual. In other words, he was not trying to create prose that shared its most important structures and qualities with a musical form. Quoting is what Hughes did in the 1923 poem "The Weary Blues" when he incorporated blues lyrics into an otherwise traditional stanza structure. The fundamental difference between "The Weary Blues" and his 1926

49 Noting that the earliest blues lyrics typically focused on rural life and themes, Sterling Brown described the prototypical twelve-bar stanza as usually consisting of "three lines of four stresses each, the second line repeating the first sometimes with minor variations, and the third line clinching the form with a rhyme" in his article "The Blues" Phylon 13. 4 (1952): 287. One key difference is that Hughes modified the traditional rhyme scheme by breaking most of his stanzas into six (rather than three) lines.

blues poems in Fine Clothes is that these later poems were trying to create the blues in a written medium—they were positing an analogy between poetic and musical forms.

Critics in the 1920s often spoke as if perfect analogies existed across creative genres. White music scholar and critic George Pullen Jackson described R. Nathanial Dett's piano piece "Mammy" (one of four pieces in his piano suite Magnolia, which Jackson heard performed by the composer at Fisk in 1923) as an "unspeakably soulful poem-without-words."[50] Waldo Frank, in his Introduction to Jean Toomer's book Cane, wrote about Toomer's "fashioning of beauty" and described his poems as "songs."[51] But the reality was that, while they may have wanted their poems to be musical or lyrical in the traditional sense, few writers of the period were trying to make poetry of music. Fewer still were trying to make poetry out of the "low down" musical form of the blues, identified as it was with working-class debauchery.[52] To make the claim that blues songs were art was to risk one's claim to middle class respectability—but of course Hughes was quite ready to take that risk.

In some key ways, what Hughes did in creating his blues poems resembles the work done by contemporary avant-garde visual artists, among whom, "[b]y the beginning of the twentieth century, the idea of incorporating musical elements into painting had become widespread and was often mentioned in an attempt to explain various approaches to abstract painting."[53] Artists such as Vassily Kandinsky, Johannes Itten, Heinrich

---

50 Jon Michael Spencer, "Modernism and the Negro Renaissance" in A Modern Mosaic: Art and Modernism in the United States, ed. Townsend Luddington et al. (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2000): 51.

51 Waldo Frank, Introduction to Cane (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1923).

52 Angela Davis, Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday (New York: Vintage, 1999).

53 Hajo Düchting, Paul Klee: Painting Music (Munich: Prestel, 1997): 13.

Neugeboren, August Macke, and Paul Klee imagined and put into practice elaborate theories about colors being analogous to particular musical notes and forms as early as 1911.[54] Paul Klee in particular provides a useful model for thinking about Hughes's literary innovations. In 1906, before he thought seriously about potential analogies between painting and music, Klee hoped that his work "should be as plain and simple as a folk song"[55]—much in the way that Hughes strove for a plainspoken diction in his poems. By the beginning of his Bauhaus period, Klee was "trying to solve compositional problems through recourse to music." Klee began much as Hughes did in "The Weary Blues," by quoting musical elements. In "Drawing with the Fermata," (1918) Klee used "fermatas or musical pauses...in the top left-hand corner" to suggest physiognomy (an eye).[56] In his 1919 watercolor "In Bach's Style" Klee used lines reminiscent of a musical score, and arranged on them "abstract symbols of stars, plants and buildings."[57]

In the 1920s, Klee moved toward more abstract and comprehensive visual representations of musical elements—much as Hughes did with his shift to first-person blues poems. By the 1930s, Klee used transparent overlapping layers of paint to convey rhythm and time. This was a significant change because his previous music-inspired works used musical notation—a written form—to represent music on his canvases. Klee's polyphony created a visual representation of music from whole cloth, rather than borrowing from the abstract visual representations of sheet music. Likewise, Hughes had similar options when creating his blues poems. He might have chosen to abandon the

---

54 See Vassily Kandinsky, Impression III (Concert), 1911. Kandinsky's 1912 treatise "On the Spiritual in Art" posited "a theory of sound based on colours and forms freed from pure representationalism." Düchting, 20-2.

55 Düchting, 17.

56 Düchting, 29-30.

57 Düchting, 29.

poetic line ala Baudelaire and create prose poems that looked like sheet music—unlineated compositions that relied on punctuation, subscripts, superscripts, symbols, and marginal notes to represent the musical progressions of the blues. But Hughes was trying to evoke musical performances rendered originally by folk artists who produced oral—not written—compositions; this fact may have influenced the literary choices he made when rendering the blues in print. But Hughes's blues poems were visual renderings, not oral ones, and had a meaningful existence on the page. He chose to contend with their visual nature by downplaying it—making each poem seem like a simple transcription of a single human voice.[58] His strategy is best seen by comparison with The Souls of Black Folk, a work in which W. E. B. DuBois relied on the inaccessibility of his musical transcriptions of the folk melodies that served as epigraphs for each chapter. None of DuBois's early epigraph transcriptions in Souls had titles, attributions, or other explanatory text. Only in the final chapter, "Of the Sorrow Songs," did he let his audience in on the surprise: that a black folk form can be and was presented in the same notational system typically reserved for high-status classical music.[59] Raymond Williams pointed out that literature is associated with social privilege and elite educational achievement; the printed book is a symbol of cultural privilege because access to it is limited by one's

58 Hughes's choices to foreground the speaker/singer, and downplay the mediating influence of the poet anticipated the aim of later Black Arts Movement poets to "incarnate the performer" by blurring the distinctions between poem and song, instrument and voice. For a discussion of incarnating the performer, see Tony Bolden, "All Birds Sing Bass: The Revolutionary Blues of Jayne Cortez," African American Review, 35.1 (Spring 2001): 62.

59 DuBois's epigraphs also seem to reference the "concert versions" of these spirituals, such as those performed by trained vocal groups such as the Fisk Jubilee Singers—a choice that emphasized the songs' high cultural status. (In the 1870s, the Fisk Jubilee Singers performed spirituals at an international music festival in Boston, as well as at the White House, and in England for Queen Victoria).

socio-economic position.[60] Musical notation was a privileged kind writing in the 1920s, which helps explain why Hughes chose to eschew a notational system devised for representing complex sounds and rhythms, and relied instead on more conventional (and thus simpler-seeming) poetic strategies such as enjambment, rhyme, anaphora, epistrophe, assonance, and ellipsis.

For Klee, the major difficulty was translating musical tones into particular colors.[61] Hughes had similar trouble rendering certain nuances of vocal performance in verse, most dramatically the pacing and emphasis of sustained words and syllables. In the case of "Bound No'th Blues," the repetition of the word "road," which grows more dense and intense in the poem's final stanza, makes the poem itself a kind of open road;[62]

---

60 Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature (New York: Oxford UP, 1977): 47.

61 Düchting, 45.

62 D. H. Lawrence wrote of Whitman (the only American poet other than Hughes to create a truly new poetic form), "Whitman's essential message was the Open Road. The leaving of the soul free unto herself, the leaving of his fate to her and to the loom of the open road. Which is the bravest doctrine man has ever proposed to himself." Lawrence considered Whitman unsuccessful because of the sympathetic nature of Leaves of Grass; his inclination to feel for (rather than with) slaves, prostitutes, and syphilitics meant that his poetic speaker fundamentally compromised the openness of his new free verse form. D. H. Lawrence, Studies in Classic American Literature (New York: Penguin Books, 1977): 183. Hughes greatly admired Whitman, and was honored by the 1927 invitation to speak at the Walt Whitman Foundation, where he praised Whitman's depictions of African Americans and development of free verse, and "described his own work...as descending from Whitman's example." Rampersad, The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume 1, 146. George Hutchinson noted that "[p]robably no white American poet has had a greater impact on black American literature than Walt Whitman, yet the history, nature, and extent of this impact have barely been recognized, let alone analyzed," save by Arnold Rampersad and Donald B. Gibson. Whitman's work was the subject of some of the first systematic critiques of representations of African Americans in American literature (a kind of critique that is now central to the black literary tradition), and also occassioned an early differentiation between "the economic and ideological foundations of literary racism" and a praiseworthy aesthetics based on "egalitarian and democratic principles" that pointed the way for future black poets.

readers have to improvise the pacing of lines in what feels like an open-ended rhythmic space. Hughes had to rely on the surrounding lines and stanzas to signal to readers the number of beats or syllables that a single word might have. In "Bound No'th Blues," this interpretative difficulty starts with the very first word in the poem: the dialect word "Goin'" which may be pronounced with one or two syllables, depending on context. All that readers can be certain of is that the word is not pronounced like its two-syllable Standard English predecessor "going." In the final stanza of the poem, things get even more difficult:

> Road, road, road, O!
> Road, road…road…road, road!
> Road, road, road, O!
> On the no'thern road.
> These Mississippi towns ain't
> Fit fer a hoppin' toad.[63]

In the three previous stanzas, the first lines are each approximately five syllables long and use predominantly conventional pronunciation ("Goin' down de road, Lawd," "Road's in front 'o me," and "Hates to be lonely,")—which leads the reader to expect this of the first line of the final stanza that reads as only four syllables ("Road, road, road, O!"). The problem is that there are no clear markers telling us whether this last stanza is repeating or varying the poem's well-established line length pattern. This interpretive problem escalates with the ellipses in the second line of the stanza ("Road, road…road…road, road!"), which distinguish it from all the previous second lines of stanzas (all either four or six syllables long in conventional reading). Then Hughes repeated the line "Road,

---

George B. Hutchinson, "Whitman and the Black Poet: Kelly Miller's Speech to the Walt Whitman Fellowship." American Literature 61.1 (March, 1989): 46-9.

63 Hughes, Fine Clothes, 87.

road, road, O!" so readers are again faced with the question of pacing. What is the pace of each of these lines? We are left to infer, to interpret—and ultimately to guess.[64]

Hughes struggled to represent in verse some of the same song elements in the 1920s that continue to dog contemporary musicologists. Alona Sagee's 2007 article "Bessie Smith, 'Down Hearted Blues' and 'Gulf Coast Blues' Revisited" concluded that the legendary blues vocalist was a relentless improviser and innovator: "although Bessie's phrases display some similarities with each other, they constantly vary in imaginative ways."[65] Sagee's article filled a gap in music scholarship by notating transcriptions of two of Smith's early recorded performances, and making a detailed line-by-line analysis of musical features such as pitch, rhythm, melodic characteristics, and "melodic-harmonic and text-music relationships."[66] A blues poem hardly resembles a notated transcription, but both try to capture much of the same complexity—to render at the very least the distinctiveness of its first-person speaker/singer, and the rhythms of his or her lament. And both encounter the same difficulties: Hughes's blues poems tended to break down when he tried to render sustained words or syllables. What is remarkable is that those ruptures in the facade of seamless representation happened so infrequently given the complexity of what he undertook: rendering a creative form (music) that did not

---

64 Meta Jones wrote about vocal instrumentality in Hughes's jazz poetry of the 1950s and '60s, and argued that his poems were shaped by (and sometimes required of the readers) a familiarity with jazz performance. Meta DuEwa Jones, "Listening to What the Ear Demands: Langston Hughes and His Critics," Callaloo 25.4 (Fall 2002): 1145-75. Some of Hughes's readers in the 1920s were familiar with blues music, and their degrees of familiarity inevitably made some more confident than others about the way they read lines such as "Road, road, road, O!" which offered few clues about pacing. His blues poems were meant to challenge his readers. However, I do not believe Hughes meant to make previous hearing of the musical blues a requisite for understanding his blues poetry of the 1920s.

65 Sagee, 117–8.

66 Sagee, 117.

translate easily into his chosen medium (printed poetry). Although poetry is historically linked to song, and the two forms share many features, the differences between written verse and musical performance (for example, a written description of Bessie Smith singing "Gulf Coast Blues" and an audio recording of Smith's performance) are significant enough to force hard decisions on any poet thoughtful enough to take the challenge of the blues poem in-hand.

As Tony Bolden points out, the very scope of the blues makes definition and description of the form exceedingly difficult.[67] Frank Rashid has identified three broad meanings of the musical blues that also pertain to poetry:

> The first describes a mood of depression or sadness often but not exclusively linked with the Afro-American experience; the second refers to any artistic expression of this mood; and the third consists of specific musical and poetic forms of this expression."[68]

Steven Tracy's definition of the blues also contains a similar range of meanings: "emotion, a technique, a musical form, and a song lyric."[69] In many of his earlier poems, Hughes captured a mood of depression or sadness, and also explored race and blues emotions. In "The Weary Blues," Hughes was moving toward a formal conception with his new blues stanza. Accordingly, it's useful to think of Hughes's blues stanzas as a kind of ekphrasis—an extended description of a real or imaginary work of art. Ekphrasis can be both deeply sensory and deeply personal; it depicts something heard, seen, touched, or

---

67 Tony Bolden, Afro Blue: Improvisations in African American Poetry and Culture (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2004): 39.

68 Frank Rashid, "Robert Hayden's Detroit Blues Elegies," Callaloo 4.1 (Winter, 2001): 201.

69 Steven C. Tracy, Langston Hughes and the Blues (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988): 59.

smelled by an individual, and then verbally re-created by that person. These are descriptions "rendered with human response still clinging to them."[70]

In creating a poetic analogue for a musical piece, Hughes had to make very personal choices about how to represent that form on paper. In "The Weary Blues," Hughes wanted to include the actual words of a blues song he had heard as a child in Kansas, but the composition process was far from easy. As Arnold Rampersad notes, Hughes accomplished this by setting those blues lyrics inside an otherwise conventional poem, so that "the cadences of urban black speech, derived from the South" invaded and disrupted the traditional poetic patterns. The difficulty Hughes faced was how to complete this very atypical poem, in which black vernacular speech was both the emotional center of the piece, and jarringly anachronistic:

> For two years, he kept the poem, "whose ending I had never been able to get quite right," unpublished—at a time when he was trying to publish almost everything he wrote....Meanwhile, he struggled to shape its ending—"I could not achieve an ending I liked, although I worked and worked on it."[71]

Little wonder that Hughes lost sleep over this poem; it was culturally, structurally, and formally transgressive. "The Weary Blues" moved the focus from the standard English of the first person "I" of the speaker onto the first person "I" of the bluesman (via his song), and then held the poem's gaze on the musician for the duration of the poem, which ends with the words "he crooned" "his head" and finally "He slept." Though Hughes's mature blues poems would differ by staying entirely in the first person voice of the singer/speaker, by the time of "The Weary Blues," Hughes was already focusing on the black working class, en route to "deliberately defining poetic tradition according to

---

70 Ellen Bryant Voigt, The Flexible Lyric (Athens, Georgia: U of Georgia P, 1999): 63-4

71 Rampersad, "Langston Hughes's Fine Clothes to the Jew," 147-8.

the standards of a group often seen as sub-poetic."[72] Hughes celebrated black popular culture, used black dialect, and broke the traditional blues line in half—creating a six-line stanza differentiated from the ballad that closely aligned his poetry with its rural blues antecedents.

A NOTE ON BLUES

Hughes realized that in order to create a blues poem capacious enough to convey the migrant experience of black modernity, he needed to devise a repertoire of formal devices that would capture in verse and on the page the array of sonic effects blues songs were capable of, and by which they made their complex meanings felt. The blues were widely heard in the 1920s—live and via recordings. And, as the letters about Bessie Smith written by Hughes and Van Vechten suggest, the blues were also widely discussed, and even fiercely debated, by musicians and non-musicians alike. By painstakingly developing a repertoire of poetic devices, Hughes made the blues literary. As we will see later, he also made his poetry available to, and appropriatable by, those among whom the musical blues first developed. But even in this context of highly developed blues literacy, he could not take for granted that a single musical allusion or stylistic choice would convey his meaning to his readers. It was only cumulatively that such details could have their effect; so Hughes developed whole constellations of poetic moves to make a rural blues pedigree apparent.[73]

---

72 Rampersad, "Langston Hughes's *Fine Clothes*," 145.

73 My examination of the range of formal stragegies that Hughes used in the blues poems distinguishes this study from earlier interpretations—such as Brent Hayes Edwards' close readings of blues poems in The Practice of Diaspora, which focused on poem length and code-switching. Brent Hayes Edwards, The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003): 59-68.

After the title pages and table of contents in Fine Clothes to the Jew, Hughes included this short explanatory passage headed "A Note on Blues":

> The first eight and the last nine poems in this book are written after the manner of the Negro folk-songs known as *Blues*. The *Blues*, unlike the *Spirituals*, have a strict poetic pattern: one long line repeated and a third line to rhyme with the first two. Sometimes the second line in repetition is slightly changed and sometimes, but very seldom, it is omitted. The mood of the *Blues* is almost always despondency, but when they are sung people laugh.[74]

Hughes was among the first writers to foreground the importance of the blues in a poetry collection. Five years earlier, James Weldon Johnson, in his preface to the anthology The Book of American Negro Poetry, presented an extended section on the blues—which Johnson identified as a subset of ragtime. Johnson's preface included an anecdote about the urban transformation of southern blues music, something about which he had first-hand knowledge writing for the New York musical stage:

> I remember that we appropriated about the last one of the old "jes' grew" songs. It was a song that had been sung for years all through the South. The words were unprintable, but the tune was irresistible, and belonged to nobody. We took it, re-wrote the verses, telling an entirely different story from the original, left the chorus as it was, and published the song, at first under the name of "Will Handy."[75]

---

74 Langston Hughes, Fine Clothes to the Jew (New York: Knopf, 1927): 13. Contemporary scholars from diverse fields, such as Cornel West and Eddie Glaude, have also explored this tragi-comic paradox of the blues, and used it as an organizing trope. See Cornel West, Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism (New York: Penguin, 2004), and Eddie Glaude, In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2007).

75 Johnson noted the connection to Uncle Tom's Cabin when he asserted that "[t]he earliest Ragtime songs, like Topsy, "jes' grew." James Weldon Johnson, ed. The Book of American Negro Poetry (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1922): Preface. This song has mistakenly been attributed to W. C. Handy (see "Black Music in the Driscoll Collection" by Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., The Black Perspective in Music 2.2 (Autumn 1974): 167.

Johnson's lines illustrate the creative transformations that characterized blues music in the 1920s. Artists borrowed from one another, and made decisions about which aspects of blues songs were legitimately malleable. Johnson felt comfortable pairing a borrowed tune and chorus with re-written verses that transformed an original song's core meaning. Hughes, in "The Weary Blues," tried to quote song lyrics from memory, but he also wrought a radical change on those lyrics: he split the ten-beat blues line in half, thus creating a six-line poetic stanza rather than the traditional three-line musical blues stanza.

Hughes's decision to split the musical blues line in half was no accident of transcription, but rather was made in order to create a musically-informed literary form that that was malleable enough for his lyric purposes. Hughes's introductory note in Fine Clothes made it clear that he understood that a traditional musical blues stanza was three lines long with a repeated line and an AAA rhyme scheme. The poet opened Fine Clothes with a declaration of allegiance to the blues's "strict poetic pattern"—and then, following the precedent he set in "The Weary Blues," dramatically changed the blues stanza starting with the first blues poem in the new collection, a one-stanza lyric titled "Hey!" This first blues stanza is important because it functions as a poetic preface, which Hughes meant to be read in tandem with the prose preface. "Hey!" foregrounded the new blues stanza form the poet had invented, while also leaving the geographical setting of the poem (and thus the collection) ambiguous. By focusing on the setting sun—a feature of the natural world—Hughes gestured towards the pastoral, and signaled a potential connection between the pastoral and his choice of a six-line stanza:

> Sun's a settin',
> This is what I'm gonna sing.
> Sun's a settin',
> This is what I'm gonna sing:
> I feels de blues a comin',

Wonder what de blues'll bring?[76]

If written in the traditional manner, Hughes's blues stanza would look like this:

Sun's a settin', this is what I'm gonna sing.
Sun's a settin', this is what I'm gonna sing:
I feels de blues a comin', wonder what de blues'll bring?

This lineation matters because Hughes's six-line blues poem stanza created opportunities for speed via enjambment, which pulls the reader from line to line. It highlighted what would have been internal rhyme in musical blues lines by placing those rhymes at the ends of the additional poetic lines—a choice that created more potential for complex end-rhyme combinations because there were twice as many line endings per stanza. Hughes also created the possibility of reshuffling the differences in line length; rather than the proximate first lines (one and two in the traditional version) being the only pair with the same syllable and stress count (typically, ten syllables and five stresses), Hughes's six-line stanza multiplied the possible rhythmic combinations. Conversely, by changing the blues lineation, Hughes minimized the possibilities for misunderstanding the rhythm and pacing of sustained words or syllables (such as the repeated "oh"s in "Bound No'th Blues") by diminishing the number of syllables and stresses per line—thus reducing the possibility of variant readings. One of the things this does is call attention to the medium in which he is working, and therefore calls attention to the effort of capturing sonic features in written form. Because of his choice of lineation, many of Hughes's six-line blues stanzas have something of the quality of the sestina, with their dense end-word repetitions and assertively non-narrative character.

---

76 Hughes, Fine Clothes, 17. Hughes's focus on dusk is reminiscent of Jean Toomer's very different pastoral vision in Cane, in which dusk and the setting sun also figure prominently.

In other poems in Fine Clothes, Hughes used the traditional quatrain ballad stanza to emphasize the association with music. The quatrain has been described by Paul Fussell as "the workhorse stanza of English poetry" and has long retained a formal identity and set of strong associations—with "common mnemonic verses, nursery rhymes, rhymed saws and proverbs and admonitions, hymns, and popular songs."[77] In the case of "Ballad of Gin Mary" Hughes used the word "ballad" in the title, which made this connection even more transparent. For a poet who routinely used successive lines with significant differences in stress and syllable counts, it would have been easy for Hughes to transform a musical blues stanza into a quatrain (as follows), use or modify the traditional a-b-c-b or a-b-a-b rhyme scheme, and thus take advantage of the ballad stanza's musical associations:

> Sun's a settin', this is what I'm gonna sing.
> Sun's a settin', this is what I'm gonna sing:
> I feels de blues a comin',
> wonder what de blues'll bring?[78]

That Hughes chose not to employ the ballad stanza in most of his blues poems says something about the importance of distinguishing his blues stanza from ballads—arguably the most recognizable of the musical poetic forms.

The ballad stanza is also traditionally narrative, and Hughes used this formal property both to specify and to embody the concrete circumstances of blues performance; he did so in order to sum up a particularly complex black historical experience. One of the key distinctions between folk (or rural) blues and classic blues is that the former is

---

77 Paul Fussell, Poetic Meter & Poetic Form (New York: McGraw Hill, 1979): 133-9.

78 Hughes did this only once in the blues poems in Fine Clothes, with "Misery"—the third poem in the volume, which begins as follows: "Play de blues for me./Play de blues for me./No other music/'Ll ease ma misery." Hughes, Fine Clothes, 19

intensely lyrical. In poetry, the lyric mode is suited to convey emotions (particularly, complicated emotions). Unlike narrative, it is not organized by character, action, event, or the passage of time.[79] In Fine Clothes, Hughes's poems in quatrains are indeed more narrative than lyrical. In "Misery," we learn in stanza one that the speaker is deeply sad, and we hear her request/command to play the blues for her; in stanza two, we learn the reason for her sadness: the unfaithfulness of her lover; in stanza three, we readers learn that she's crying, and are accused of a lack of understanding; in the fourth and final stanza, we learn that the blues are a response (and possibly a treatment or cure for) misery. "The Ballad of Gin Mary" (also in quatrains, but not a blues poem) is even more intensely narrative, and tells the story of the court appearance and conviction of its speaker. The opening three stanzas of the poem give a sense of its overall sequential nature, and read as follows:

Ballad of Gin Mary

Carried me to de court,
Judge was settin' there.
Looked all around me,
Didn't have a friend nowhere.

Judge Pierce he says, Mary.
Old Judge says, Mary Jane,

79Maurice Manning, "Blue Yodel." Lecture. January 11, 2010. Warren Wilson College, Asheville, North Carolina. Not unlike the oral culture of 1920s blues, contemporary poetry scholarship relies heavily on face-to-face exchanges. Many of the most influential contemporary poet-scholars restrict their literary critical publications, and instead regularly deliver academic lectures that are never circulated in written form. These lectures tend to happen in or around highly selective writing conferences and MFA programs in Creative Writing, often as an official part of the program or curriculum. This genre of literary criticism is meant for, and circulated within, groups of listeners who are also writers of poetry; the existence of the genre is considered by many of its practitioners to be a critique of, and response to, mainstream written modes of academic literary critical exchange that marginalize praxis-identified scholarship.

Ever time I mounts this bench
I see yo' face again.

O, Lawd! O, Lawd!
O, Lawd . . . Lawdee!
Seems like bad licker,
Judge, won't let me be.[80]

Hughes used some innovative approaches to disrupt the narrative character of his quatrains in Fine Clothes, such as the alternating single-line stanzas in "Death of Do-Dirty: A Rounder's Song," but mainly he let the ballad stanza do its traditional storytelling work.[81]

Although acknowledging the complex appeal of certain quatrains, particularly those embedded in sonnets, Paul Fussell noted that the quatrain is the most recognizably "poetic" looking stanza: "the unsophisticated person's experience of poetry is almost equivalent to his experience of quatrains."[82] Hughes was not above announcing creative categories to his readers (for example, with titles that effectively declared "this is a ballad"). So his choice not to use a quatrain for most of his blues poems (which would have effectively announced "these are poems") is significant. Hughes knew that depicting a working-class musical form in the elite medium of poetry was a transgressive move, and, if the critical response is an accurate gauge, African American readers were in fact shocked when Fine Clothes came out in 1927.[83] Hughes was certainly looking to promote

---

80 Hughes, Fine Clothes, 35.

81 Hughes, Fine Clothes, 36-7.

82 Fussell, 133.

83 As Dace and Ing noted, "[n]ot until Knopf on 4 February 1927 issued his second, more controversial volume of verse did some reviewers truly trash Hughes's poetry. Most reviews of Fine Clothes to the Jew praise it, yet the negatives approach the vitriol levied by the press at Ibsen's Ghosts. Although the greatest outrage was reserved for his matter, many complaints greeted the manner as well. These fans disqualified his verse as poetry. All reviews, favorable and unfavorable alike, tend to agree to its attributes—its accurate evocation of low-life African-American spirit—but disagree as to

working class creative culture, and make popular forms accessible to a wider audience. Had his point been merely to position the blues as poetry, a quatrain would have sufficed. But Hughes must have been after bigger game, because he ultimately chose a complex stanza form that challenged his readers, and allowed for more subtle sophistication and lyricism.

The sestet was a risky choice because it was less immediately recognizable or legible to Hughes's readers. The sestet (like the blues) was a relatively young form. It was only in Wordsworth's era that the six-line stanza took on a distinctive identity as a fixed form, and ultimately became associated with a modern georgics—lyric poetry that positioned rural life as the site of universal truths and personal transformation. The Romantic poets carved out an identity for the sestet, which linked it with the natural world, the organic, complex cycles of life and death, and complex human emotions in the face of a teeming world. Not all of Hughes's sestet blues stanzas in Fine Clothes are in a lyrical mode, so it would be misleading to say that his choice of lineation alone signaled an alignment with the rural, or with a rural blues aesthetic. But I do think it is fair to say that the stanza form the poet chose could more easily bring a rural-identified lyricism to the fore.

FOLK BLUES, CLASSIC BLUES

By the 1920s, details of blues form had already been marshalled in debates about what the blues was and ought to be—arguments that made formal properties into signs of social meaning. For David Chinitz, the two inter-related problems that Hughes solved were "how to write blues lyrics in such a way that they work on the printed page,

---

the value of such poetry." Tish Dace and Thomas Inge, eds. Langston Hughes: The Contemporary Reviews (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009): 5.

and...how to exploit the blues form poetically without losing all sense of authenticity."[84] Scholars who concern themselves with the distinctions between folk and classic blues often speak in terms of authenticity—which generally means adherence to a particular set of established musical or thematic patterns. I am less interested in the idea of authenticity than I am in the various elements and patterns that are said to constitute it. In this study, what is at stake in the debate between classic and folk blues is the extent to which rural musical aesthetics shaped the new poetic form that Hughes created in the 1920s.[85]

Some distinctions between folk and classic blues rest at least in part on contextual elements—particularly, information about the blues performer, the context of creation, and the context of performance. These definitions focus on whether the vocalist created the piece him- or herself, was a professional or amateur performer, whether material support for the piece came from a local community or a mass audience, the mode of creation (improvised or composed), and the mode of instrumentation (type of instrumental accompaniment).[86] A second smaller group of critical writing focuses on

---

84 David Chinitz, "Literacy and Authenticity: The Blues Poems of Langston Hughes," Callaloo 19.1 (1996): 177.

85 Karl Miller suggested that great caution be used with the category of "folk music" itself because "the preponderance of commercial music in the South before, during, and after the great wave of southern song collecting by folklorists suggests that 'folk music' was a framework placed on an existing, complex musical culture, a model that did little to describe the musical complexity on the ground. Folklore was something that happened to certain sounds and styles at particular times as part of larger projects of reclamation, differentiation, and control, including Jim Crow segregation....Blues and country music...are a case in point. Often sold as the uncut sounds of modern primitives, they emerged out of artists' long and learned engagement with a variety of popular styles from Tin Pan Alley and Broadway to the minstrel stage." Miller, 9.

86 Examples include Alain Locke's 1935 The Negro and His Music (Salem, New Hampshire: Ayer, 1988): 12 and Jon Michael Spencer's "The Diminishing Rural Residue of Folklore in City and Urban Blues, Chicago 1915-1950," Black Music Research Journal 12.1 (Spring 1992): 25-41. Spencer predicated his arguments about the changing

thematic content, and defines folk and classic blues categories in terms of shifts in subject matter, speaker, mood, and thematic emphasis.[87] As I have previously mentioned, three of Hughes's blues poems from Fine Clothes are explicitly written from the perspectives of southern migrants—one speaker is literally walking on a southern road towards a northern city.[88] But speaker and subject matter are only partial measures of a blues poem's proximity to or distance from its southern rural musical roots. As James Weldon Johnson noted, in "Oh, Didn't He Ramble!" (his vaudeville adaptation of a folk blues song), he changed most of the lyrics but left the song's musical forms and structures intact. The circumstances of composition and performance of "Oh, Didn't He Ramble!," as well as its themes, put this song soundly in the category of classic (or vaudeville) blues, whereas analysis of its music may expose its rural folk elements.

A third category of assessment (and the set of criteria upon which my arguments about rural elements in Hughes's blues poems focus) is technical. Technical assessments examine criteria such as stanza patterns, lineation, syntax, diction, repetition (of rhymes, sounds, and phrases), mode (lyric, narrative, or dramatic), and meter—all elements that musical and literary forms have in common. An important caveat is that, even looking at technical elements—which seem on the surface to be easy to identify and measure—it is often extremely difficult to classify blues poems as predominantly folk or classic in their sensibilities. This is in part because the of the imperfect analogy between art forms;

---

mythology, theology, and theodicy of the blues on the changing contexts in which blues artists learned and performed their craft.

87 For example, see Jeff Todd Titon, "Thematic Pattern in Downhome Blues Lyrics: The Evidence on Commercial Phonograph Records Since World War II," The Journal of American Folklore 90.357 (July-September 1977): 316-330.

88 In an additional blues poem, "Gypsy Man," the female speaker repeatedly tells the reader that she is a migrant from the urban South—from Memphis, Tennessee.

although music and poetry share a number of elements, those elements exist in different orders, combinations, and densities in each. So the litmus test for what makes a folk blues song breaks down to a certain extent when applied to a blues poem. Additionally, as Alona Sagee points out in her study of Bessie Smith, many artists were exposed to and learned from both folk and classic blues traditions:

> Close study...may lead us at least to question such differentiation in favour of an approach that recognises that there are cross-influences between the two forms of blues, and that their interrelations are complex. As David Evans writes, "these two forms are really two ends of a continuum", whose parts cannot be easily separated.[89]

Finally, as Dana Levin notes, the effects of a poetic strategy are contextually specific. Enjambment might create a certain affect in one poem, and the exact opposite affect in another; its consequences depend on every other element in the poem in question.[90] So in order for rural influences in Hughes's blues poems to make sense, they have to be assessed both through the particulars of resemblance to rural musical forms, and also through a broader assessment of the sum of those parts, mindful that folk and classic are designations on a single spectrum rather than "either-or" propositions.

It is also important to note that the very category of the "folk" was a racially-loaded modern invention that came to the fore between 1890-1920, largely through the efforts of professional folklorists and anthropologists. As Karl Miller demonstrated in Segregating Sound, scholars were interested in distinguishing the cultural traits of racial, regional, and national groups from one another—a process that often required the study of isolated groups in which cross-cultural influence was at a minimum. Because of this

---

89 Sagee, 118.

90 Dana Levin, "Drama, Silence, Speed, Assemblage and Accrual, or Five Poems That Taught Me Something About the Line (with No Thanks to Facebook)." Lecture. July 4, 2009. Warren Wilson College, Asheville, North Carolina.

emphasis on isolation, the "folk" category was frequently applied to rural subjects. Some scholars used the folk category to make claims about superiority and inferiority, and others to demonstrate that each group produced unique and valuable cultural products. Regardless of their ideological assumptions, they helped create the popular notion that there was such thing as a "pure" and distinctive southern or rural or Negro musical tradition. They created this standard of authenticity despite the fact that, among most music performers and audiences, this kind of homogeneous music culture did not exist; theirs was a heterogeneous world of cross-genre borrowing and wide-ranging musical influences—tendencies that were intensified by modern print and sound-recording technologies. In the 1920s, the blues came to be understood as a racially black music form, within which traditional rural (or "folk") and urban influences could easily be distinguished.[91] That many of the so-called distinguishing features of urban and rural blues were exagerated oversimplifications does nothing to lessen the power of the categories—both for 1920s listeners and for the performers bound up in a culture industry that commodified their work along racial lines. Indeed, Hughes relied on these modern understandings of the blues and the folk when he was inventing the blues poem form, and simultaneously theorizing racialized sources for black cultural vitality.

The following chart is a compilation of 1920s blues attributes identified in works by John Barnie, David Chinitz, Alona Sagee, Jon Michael Spencer, Jeff Todd Titon, and Steven Tracy.[92] I have attempted to include all the formal and structural attributes about

---

91 Miller, 1-22, 85-214.

92 The specific works I have drawn from are: John Barnie, "Formulaic Lines and Stanzas in the Country Blues," Ethnomusicology 22.3 (September 1978): 457-473; David Chinitz, "Litaracy and Authenticity: The Blues Poems of Langston Hughes," Callaloo 19.1 (Winter 1996): 177-192; Alona Sagee, "Bessie Smith, 'Down Hearted Blues' and 'Gulf Coast Blues' Revisited," Popular Music 26.1 (2007): 118; Jon Michael Spencer, "The Diminishing Rural Residue of Folklore in City and Urban Blues, Chicago 1915-

which there is general scholarly consensus, as well as perceptive individual observations about 1920s blues music that have not occasioned critical outcry and contradiction—particularly when those observations are based on newly-available recorded sources.

Table 1. 1920s Blues Attributes: Folk versus Classic Blues Variants

Folk Blues [93] (aka Country Blues, Rural Blues)	**Classic Blues**
Tendency toward 5 stresses per line	"
Alternating stressed and unstressed syllables (tendency toward iambic pentameter)	"
Artist has free reign to insert unstressed syllables between the musical beats	"
Artist is free to draw out a single word or syllable melismatically over several beats	"
Spontaneous affect of speaker/singer	Self-conscious affect of speaker/singer
Predominance of AAA and AAB stanzas. Regular slight variation of repeat lines	Structurally complex. Tendency toward variation and invention in stanza patterns
Verses relate to each other through a consistency of mood, music and theme	Verses relate to each other through a rational progression (often chronological)
Eschewal of complex prosody	Complex prosody; predominant internal rhyme

1950," Black Music Research Journal, 12.1 (Spring 1992): 25-41; Jeff Todd Titon, "Thematic Pattern in Downhome Blues Lyrics: The Evidence on Commercial Phonograph Records Since World War II," Journal of American Folklore, 90.357 (July – September 1977): 316-330; and Steven C. Tracy, Langston Hughes and the Blues (Champaign, Illinois: U of Illinois P, 2001).

93 The "folk" is a category of inquiry in New Negro/Harlem Renaissance scholarship that is frequently used, but the distinctively rural aspects of folk culture are frequently elided or downplayed. Many otherwise useful discussions of the folk do not examine geography as a meaningful social category, but rather regard place simply as the context in which the folk practice originated—a benchmark against which a folkway's change or continuity can be measured. Demarcating urban and rural folkways can provide important insights into African American identity and culture, particularly in periods of dramatic change like the 1920s.

Homely diction / verbal drabness	Elevated/colorful diction
Frequent use of formulaic phrases and imagery (ex: going down the road, had a dream, laughing to keep from crying)	Idiomatic images, or new twists on familiar images
Lack of resolution OR abrupt change of topic in the final stanza	Neat resolution in the final stanza
Expectation of rhyme or syntactic closure	Expectation of rhyme and narrative closure
Use of dialect words, use of African American Vernacular English syntax	Use of standard English syntax. Optional use of dialect words

With the notable exception of David Chinitz, most scholars who work on blues poetry have assumed that city geography was destiny, and have staunchly maintained that Hughes's blues poems were shaped by classic blues.[94] In order to understand both how his early blues poems work, and what they accomplish, I think it is essential to challenge this assumption. It is clear that Hughes wrote in the classic mode when he teamed up with W. C. Handy to compose for the vaudeville stage in the summer of 1926.[95] So the young poet either already knew (or quickly learned) the ins and outs of writing big-city blues lyrics. It is also clear that, as a part-time urbanite, Hughes was most likely to encounter the blues via recording or performances in city settings—both contexts in which folk blues were less available than classic or hybrid forms. But close readings of Hughes's blues poems in Fine Clothes, particularly the poems that explicitly deal with migrants' experiences, reveals an alternate stylistic influence.

---

94 Chinitz, 179. Chinitz refers readers to Tracy's Langston Hughes and the Blues (117-23) in the footnotes, and also points to instances when Hughes wrote about his experiences of folk blues: "Songs," "I Remember," and The Big Sea (208-10).

95 In a March 26, 1926 letter to Carl Van Vechten, Hughes wrote about the beginning of that collaboration: "Handy sent me what I believe to be a good contract for setting music to my Blues. I'll let you read it when I come up." Emily Bernard, ed, Remember Me, 40.

The first of these poems occurs early on in Fine Clothes, at the end of the first section:

Homesick Blues

De railroad bridge's
A sad song in de air.
De railroad bridge's
A sad song in de air.
Ever time de trains pass
I wants to go somewhere.

I went down to de station.
Ma heart was in ma mouth
Went down to de station.
Heart was in ma mouth.
Lookin' for a box car
To roll me to de South.

Homesick blues, Lawd,
'S a terrible thing to have.
Homesick blues is
A terrible thing to have.
To keep from cryin'
I opens ma mouth an' laughs.[96]

This blues poem opens with a metaphor, a transformation: the railroad bridge is a song. The song exists in a specific place ("in de air") and it has a particular emotional quality: sadness. As Sterling Brown and Jeff Todd Titan noted, the railroad is a familiar trope in blues poetry, and is often used in formulaic patterns. Hughes's poem maintains the traditional folk blues subjects (railroads, sadness) and repetitions, but with a classic blues twist—the initial metaphor that re-makes the familiar into something vivid, new and

96 Hughes, Fine Clothes, 24. For later publications, Hughes edited out much of the dialect from his early blues poems.

specific.[97] Because this classic move happens so early in the poem, and is so striking in what it tells us about the intensity of the emotional state of the poem's speaker, it temporarily overshadows the proliferation of folk blues elements. But they are there en masse, and give the poem's speaker his particular out-of-placeness in the city. The folk blues elements make this lament more poignant because its kind of blues (like the speaker) is literally out of place in an urban context.

After the initial metaphoric pyrotechnics, the poem settles into homespun imagery and diction that is characteristic of the folk blues. The poem relies almost entirely on formulaic phrases and stock blues imagery (going "down to de station," the boxcar, a heart in the mouth, laughing to keep from crying). With the exception of the Latinate word "terrible" in line sixteen, all the other words in the poem are only one or two syllables long, and their simplicity contributes to our sense of the speaker as honest and plainspoken. "Homesick Blues" is written with Standard English syntax, which is a classic blues feature. But all but two lines in the poem (lines 15 and 16) have an orthographic marker of dialect speech, which is a folk blues characteristic. The density of dialect markers characterizes the speaker as one of the "low-down folks" not concerned

---

97 Hughes used the very specific phrase "subway trains" in his "Negro Artist" essay, and that subtle choice signaled that the trains were part of an exclusively urban geography— even if, in real-life terms, the New York subway was intimately connected with rural space because of the people who worked on it. Mark Schultz wrote about about rural migrants who came from Sparta, Georgia in 1921 and 1922 to help build the New York subway because the arrival of the boll weevil and the consequent crash of the local cotton farming economy made it impossible to find work at home. Mary Hunt's husband, Alvin, was enticed by the prospect of "money in his hand every week," went to work digging the New York subways, and sent money home to support his family. Mark Schultz, The Rural Face of White Supremacy (Urbana, Illinois: U of Illinois P, 2005): 207. In contrast to the urban "subway trains" in the "Negro Artist" essay, the train in "Homesick Blues" is a painful symbol exactly because its job is to links distant places; the speaker of the poem is unable to experience that closeness to home, despite the trains' proximity.

here with imitating white speech ("de" instead of "the"; "Ever" for "Every"; "wants" versus "want"; "Ma" for "my"; "Lookin'" without the final "g"; "Lawd" instead of "Lord"; "'S" versus "is"; "cryin'" without the final "g"; "an'" without the final "d"; "laughs" instead of the standard first-person present "laugh"). And the important first and last words of the poem are also marked as dialect ("De" and "laughs"), and serve as a kind of bookend or frame.[98]

The speaker's use of the word "Lawd" at the end of line thirteen is interesting because it may be a rhetorical aside, or may signal the poem's addressee. The speaker may or may not be talking to God, but the overall feeling of the lament is not self-conscious. The poem has the spontaneous quality of the folk blues rather than the self-conscious affect of classic blues. It feels personal in part because of its near-confessional quality, particularly in the second stanza that tells the story of a dangerous thing that the speaker almost did as a result of his profound sadness: hop a boxcar home.

The poem tells about a southern migrant who is routinely made homesick by the passing of trains. The three-stanza song begins and ends in present tense; the speaker is in the throes of sadness, which he identifies as a routine (almost ubiquitous) condition. He tells the story (in past tense) of a time he went to the train station looking for a boxcar to jump—so he could return to the South. But the emotional state of the speaker is the real subject of this poem. There is no narrative closure or neat resolution at the end to align this poem with the classic blues tradition. We don't know what happened to make the

98 This poem functions as a prologue for the next section of the book, which is called "Railroad Avenue." The blues poem, positioned as it does, ties the idea of migration to urban life. Most of the poems in this next section are written in Standard English. Railroad Avenue in New York City has since been re-named Park Avenue. For historical information on trains and railways in Harlem, see the local history website "Industrial & Offline Terminal Railroads of Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island, Bronx & Manhattan: Harlem Transfer," <http://members.trainweb.com/bedt/indloco/ht.html>

speaker decide to leave the North, nor why he failed to go, nor do we know if he will repeat the attempt. But none of that is really important. What is central in this poem is the larger irony: a poem that begins with a metaphoric transformation (bridge into song) is not about the changing emotional condition of the speaker. The blues is a strategy that the speaker uses to transform the exterior manifestations of deep sadness—tears into laughter—but his homesickness doesn't change. His emotional state is largely consistent throughout the poem, which is conveyed by the poem's uniformity of tone—a common organizing device in the folk blues.

The prosody of this poem is made more complex by its six-line stanza. Rendered in traditional tercet lineation, the rhyme scheme of the three blues stanzas would read like this:

A-A-A

B-B-B

C-C-C[99]

Hughes's choice to break the traditional blues line in half, while simultaneously maintaining the traditional blues end-rhyme and anaphora, forecloses on many opportunities to create new internal rhymes; but his choices both add complexity to the actual end rhyme pattern, and highlight the three unrhymed end words ("Lawd" "is" and "cryin'") rather than the single unrhymed end word in each of the two previous stanzas ("pass" and "car"):

A-B-A-B-C-B

D-E-D-E-F-E

G-H-I-H-J-H

---

99 The last word presents a near-rhyme: "have" and "laughs."

These variations created by Hughes's radical lineation give the final stanza energy, and work against the repetitive neatness of the folk blues stanza. Just as the first stanza, written in present tense, throws the reader a curve with the beauty and originality of its initial metaphor, this final stanza parallels that disruption of expectations. Its rhyme is still regular, but because of the density and pacing of the repetitions in the previous stanzas (and the way they maintain the end-word pattern), the final stanza's rhyme scheme feels like it is beginning to break down—although it also has three perfectly rhyming end-words. The third stanza positions those rhyming end-words in a different order, and also introduces three (rather than one) un-rhyming end-words—all at the same moment when the speaker is relating his difficulty coping with homesickness. It is a sophisticated poetic move, this slight but powerful variation in stanza pattern, and may feel to readers like the complex prosody of the classic blues. But this significant effect was achieved with folk blues means—a slight wavering in emotional and tonal control. It succeeds precisely because the subtle variation is unexpected. A classic blues stanza, with its high degree of variation, would need a different approach to convey this type and degree of uncertainty.

A close reading of "Bound No'th Blues," a poem from the final section of Fine Clothes, yields a similarly dense pattern of folk blues strategies. "Bound No'th Blues" is important because it explicitly locates the form and prosody of "Homesick Blues" in rural space:

Bound No'th Blues

Goin' down de road, Lawd,
Goin' down de road.
Down de road, Lawd,
Way, way down de road.
Got to find somebody
To help me carry dis load.

Road's in front o' me,
Nothin' to do but walk.
Road's in front o' me,
Walk…and walk…and walk.
I'd like to meet a good friend
To come along an' talk.

Hates to be lonely,
Lawd, I hates to be sad.
Says I hates to be lonely,
Hates to be lonely an' sad,
But ever friend you finds seems
Like they try to do you bad.

Road, road, road, O!
Road, road . . . road . . . road, road!
Road, road, road, O!
On the No'thern road.
These Mississippi towns ain't
Fit fer a hoppin' toad.[100]

As in "Homesick Blues," in "Bound No'th Blues" Hughes also uses a lyrical mode, stock motifs and phrases (going down the road, carrying a load, friends who "do you bad"), homespun diction, dialect, a personal-sounding (rather than formal) mode of address, tonal consistency across the stanzas, and rhyme and syntax to create closure. Similarly, his prosody is rendered more complex by the six-line stanza. In tercets, this poem's rhyme scheme would read:

A-A-A

B-B-B

C-C-C

A-A-A

In actuality, the rhyme scheme looks like this:

---

100 Hughes, Fine Clothes, 87.

A-a-A-a-B-a

C-D-C-D-E-D

F-G-F-G-H-G

a-A-a-A-I-A[101]

What we see because of Hughes's lineation are the fissures that would not disrupt the end-rhyme pattern of the tercet blues form: the slant rhyme of "Lawd" and "road" in stanza one, and the slant rhyme of "O" with "road" and "toad" in stanza four. There is a surprising and quirky insult at the end (when the speaker asserts that "These Mississippi towns ain't/Fit fer a hoppin' toad"), but in this poem, as with "Homesick Blues," the big disruptions come at the beginning and the end—only in this case, the variations are mainly those of rhyme and meter.

"Bound No'th Blues" and "Homesick Blues" are formally and thematically parallel laments, though the foci of their sadness differ: wanting to leave the South, and wanting to leave the North. The fact that "Homesick Blues" comes earlier in the volume opens up two possibilities. One, that these are two different speakers who may experience a similar fate up North. Or two, that "Bound No'th Blues" is a flashback from the speaker of "Homesick Blues" to a more distant past—a time before he moved to the northern city. In these poems, North and South are linked by the roads and rails that physically connect them, but are more powerfully linked by shared emotional experiences of place—much like the poem "Afraid" connected past and present, African and American, and rural and urban experience. Everyone has the blues, these blues poems, read in tandem, seem to say; the blues are the common ground of African American experience. And the blues

101 The lower-case letters indicate a slant or near rhyme.

stanza itself brings the country to the city, and connects those two places in an enduring way.

There's a folk saying that goes something like this: you can take a boy out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the boy. In this case, it might be revised as you can take the blues out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the blues. Hughes did not eliminate the rural musical elements in many of his blues stanzas; he created "country" in his poems, and viewed those poems as exemplars of traditional blues aesthetics. What makes this more interesting is the fact that the frequency of these folk elements varies from poem to poem, sometimes contributing a more poignant sense of isolation to the speakers' laments, sometimes highlighting the speaker's successful acclimation to urban life. Also interesting is the fact that Hughes did not view his six-stanza lineation as a disruption or revision of the traditional AAA or AAB rhyme schemes of the folk blues. [102]

---

102 This contention reminds me of a similar predicament created by what the late poet Charles Wright termed a dropped line:

> As Mondrian knew,
> Art is the image of an image of an image,
> More vacant, more transparent
> With each repeat and slough:
> one skin, two skins, it comes clear,
> An old idea not that old.102

According to Wright, the above stanza from "Summer Storm" has five lines; the dramatic indent before "one skin, two skins, it comes clear" was a continuation of the previous line, a kind of intra-linear pause. Most critics have accepted Wright's ideas about lineation, and referenced the dropped line when writing about his work. I think that Hughes's blues poems suggest the expediency of a similar critical practice—one that consistently signals the poet's intent to simultaneously innovate and retain the form of the musical blues tercet.

HUGHES IN "NEGRO" DIALECT

The use of black dialect, termed African American Vernacular English (AAVE) by linguists, is one defining feature of the folk blues. But retaining this feature in 1920s blues poetry was a complicated business. The choice landed Hughes in the center of a heady controversy about dialect writing that had grown particularly fierce as the genre saw its second great wave of popularity in America. Before the 1920s, the only African American poet consistently in print was Paul Lawrence Dunbar. Dunbar wrote both in black dialect and in Standard English, and, though commercially successful, felt ambivalent about the disproportionate demand for his dialect verse.[103] By the 1920s, the literary terrain was different. A number of black poets were publishing in books and magazines. Uplift journals such as the Crisis sponsored literary contests that encouraged and promoted young black writers. And prominent authors such as James Weldon Johnson found opportunities to bring African American poetry to the attention of the general public, and released anthologies with major publishing houses.[104] But very few of these new publications were in dialect. While Hughes was successfully depicting the emotional complexities of contemporary urban black life in dialect, some of the finest black writers of the day were claiming that such a thing couldn't be done. One of the most eloquent skeptics was Johnson himself, who had previously published a number of song lyrics in dialect but then chafed at its restraints:

---

103 Michael North, The Dialect Of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature (New York: Oxford UP, 1994): 23.

104 James Weldon Johnson's 1922 anthology, The Book of American Negro Poetry, included the works of 31 contemporary authors, and, in its Preface, also noted Arthur Alonzo Schomburg's "A Bibliographical Checklist of American Negro Poetry"—a list that contained over black 100 authors from 1760 to the present that the bibliophile originally compiled for the Negro Exhibit at the 1900 Paris World's Fair.

> the Aframerican poet realizes that there are phases of Negro life in the United States which cannot be treated in the dialect either adequately or artistically. Take, for example, the phases rising out of life in Harlem, that most wonderful Negro city in the world. I do not deny that a Negro in a log cabin is more picturesque than a Negro in a Harlem flat, but the Negro in the Harlem flat is here, and he is but part of a group growing everywhere in the country, a group whose ideals are becoming increasingly more vital than those of the traditionally artistic group, even if its members are less picturesque.[105]

Hughes was interested in art that bridged the distance between the log cabin and the Harlem flat, and used dialect to those ends in his blues poems. But he was writing against a slew of other writers who were primarily interested in evoking the Old South.

Much to the chagrin of many New Negro intellectuals, dialect writing was alive and well in the 1920s, and practiced mainly by white authors. Starting in the 1880s, numerous white Local Color writers penned dialect versions of African American speech.[106] Throughout the 30 years that this first phase of black dialect writing was in vogue, the central conceit was that of the transience of the subject; authors conventionally depicted themselves as writing against time and the inroads of northern culture, which were spoiling both the folksy simplicity of southern African Americans and the white cultural achievements that were enabled by racially restrictive regimes. In large part because of the popularity of this literary genre, dialect itself ultimately came to be associated with the South, particularly the rural or plantation South—despite the fact that many black speakers who used AAVE either already lived in or were moving to other parts of the country. Circa 1920, there was a second (and larger) boom in white dialect writing.[107] Continuing the pattern established in the 1880s, black speech in the 1920s was

---

105 James Weldon Johnson, ed., Book of American Negro Poetry, Preface.

106 Michael North wrote, "The essential conceit on which these works are based is that their subject is fast disappearing....[t]he black of the dialect stories was little more than a metaphor for the antebellum way of life" (22-3).

107 North, 24.

"mocked as deviant and at the same time announced as the only true voice of the South" in American literature.[108] Hughes's response was to de-stabilize the conventional use of black dialect by placing that speech in a northern urban context in his blues poems, effectively claiming that southern rural black culture was not en route to extinction, but was being re-fashioned by modern black folks in cities.

Hughes was one of a handful of writers in the 1920s who wrote in dialect to challenge and refigure some of the stereotypes with which AAVE (and, by extension, the black people who spoke it) had been encumbered.[109] In a 1926 article on regional differences in black speech, "Aesop in Negro Dialect," Johnson re-wrote a Standard English fable in a regional black dialect form that he:

> would not be too specific in classifying.....I have attempted to do it in the form in which it would be spoken by a dialect-speaking Negro in New York City. There is, of course, no New York or Harlem Negro dialect. The Negro in New York very quickly drops dialect and speaks what is actually New Yorkese, retaining, nevertheless, a good many of the characteristic Negro turns.[110]

Johnson also wrote at length about the problems of avoiding stereotype when using dialect in writing. Judging by his poetry, Hughes seemed to agree with many of Johnson's ideas about how AAVE should be represented on the page. He shared a distaste for eye-dialect (non-standard spellings that did not alter the pronunciations of dialect words), a practice that Johnson castigated on numerous occasions as gratuitous,

---

108 North, 23.

109 A handful of white writers were also deeply concerned about misrepresentations of black speech. Julia Peterkin, in particular, feared that a deluge of sloppy competition would compromise the commercial success of her own painstakingly careful written renditions of Gulluh speech. North, 24.

110 James Weldon Johnson, quoted in "Aesop in Negro Dialect" by Addison Hibbard, American Speech 1.9 (June 1926): 497.

insulting to black speakers, and unnecessarily confusing and alienating to readers.[111] But Hughes apparently disagreed with Johnson's contention that tenure in the urban North correlated to the use of black dialect, because he put AAVE in the mouths of his blues poem speakers regardless of how long they had lived in the city.

Hughes's dialect features are internally quite consistent across the blues poems in Fine Clothes, and do not manifest any conspicuous efforts to make regional distinctions between speakers. In contrast, Johnson and his white colleagues writing for American Speech focused on refuting "the idea that Negro dialect is uniform and fixed,"[112] and worked hard to present what they viewed as the most important regional linguistic differences. Two of Hughes's blues poems about migration ("Bound No'th Blues" and "Homesick Blues") have already been quoted in full in this chapter; the third poem ("Po' Boy Blues," set in New York City) reads as follows:

Po' Boy Blues

When I was home de
Sunshine seemed like gold.
When I was home de
Sunshine seemed like gold.
Since I come up North de
Whole damn world's turned cold.

I was a good boy,
Never done no wrong.
Yes, I was a good boy,
Never done no wrong,
But this world is weary
An' de road is hard an' long.

---

111 Johnson, quoted in "Aesop," 496.

112 Addison Hibbard, "Aesop in Negro Dialect." American Speech 1.9 (June 1926): 496. In addition to Johnson and Hibbard, the writers included in the piece were Julia Peterkin, Ambrose E. Gonzales, Harris Dickson, and R. Emmet Kennedy.

I fell in love with
A gal I thought was kind.
Fell in love with
A gal I thought was kind.
She made me lose ma money
An' almost lose my mind.

Weary, weary,
Weary early in de morn.
Weary, weary,
Early, early in de morn.
I's so weary
I wish I'd never been born.[113]

Comparing AAVE features in Hughes's three blues poems demonstrates their significant linguistic consistency. The "regional" Aesop translations by Johnson et al are useful benchmarks to compare to Hughes's poems. The Aesops translations (though renderings of the same source passage) share only two AAVE features—the same number of features shared across the three blues poems. The most frequent of these features is the realization of voiceless th as d or v, which occurs a total of twenty times in these three blues poems and with roughly the same frequency in each.[114]

Table 2: AAVE Features in Hughes's Blues Poems

AAVE Features Categories and descriptions from John Rickford's 55-item table "The Features of AAVE" in African American Vernacular English (Blackwell 1999) pp. 4-9.	**Po' Boy Blues** (set in New York) frequency	**Homesick Blues** (set in New York) frequency	**Bound No'th Blues** (set in Mississippi) frequency
1. Reduction of word-final consonant clusters (i.e. sequences of two or more consonants), especially those ending in	2	0	2

113 Hughes, Fine Clothes, 23.

114 These features occur six times in "Po' Boy Blues," eight times in "Homesick Blues," and six times in "Bound No'th Blues."

t or d			
2. Deletion of word-final single consonant clusters (i.e., sequences of two or more consonants), especially those ending in t or d, as in han' for SE "hand"	1	1	2
4. Realization of final ng as n in gerunds, e.g. walkin' for SE "walking."	0	2	4
5b. Realization of voiceless th ... as d or v, as in den for SE "then"	6	8	6
8. Deletion or vocalization of r after a vowel, as in sistuh for SE "sister"	0	1	5
14. Monophthongal pronunciation of ay and oy, as in ah for SE "I" and boah for SE "boy."	1	4	0
22a. Use of ain'(t) as a general preverbal negator, for SE "am not," "isn't," "aren't," "hasn't," "haven't," and "didn't"	0	0	1
22b. Multiple negation or negative concord (that is, negating the auxiliary verb and all indefinite pronouns in the sentence) as in "He don't do nothin'" for SE "He doesn't do anything"	2	0	0

Comparing Hughes's blues poems in pairs builds a more complete picture of their similarities. "Po' Boy Blues" and "Homesick Blues" (both set in the urban North) share three features, including deletion of word-final consonant clusters and monophthongal pronunciation of ay and oy. "Po' Boy Blues and "Bound No'th Blues" (set in Mississippi) also share three AAVE features (including reduction of word-final consonant clusters). Comparing black dialect use in "Homesick Blues" and "Bound No'th

Blues" yields a similar result: four shared features (including the deletion or vocalization of r after a vowel, and realization of final ng as n in gerunds).

Table 3: Literary Dialect Features in Hughes's Blues Poems[115]

Additional Literary Dialect Features (Not identified as characteristic in AAVE linguistic research; descriptions mine)	**Po' Boy Blues** (set in New York) frequency	**Homesick Blues** (set in New York) frequency	**Bound No'th Blues** (set in Mississippi) frequency
Use of third person singular present tense in place of first or second person singular present tense. (ex: "I aims" "you does")	1	1	6
Use of first person singular present tense in place of first person singular past tense. (ex: "since I come")	1	0	0
ever in place of SE "every"	0	1	1
fer in place of SE "for"	0	0	1
gal in place of SE "girl"	0	0	1

When one takes into account the additional non-Standard English features Hughes used, the only features that distinguish the poem set in the rural South from those set in the urban North is that the speaker in "Bound No'th Blues" uses fer in place of the Standard

115 I am not qualified to determine the nature of the non-AAVE and non-Standard English features in the Hughes poems; it is possible that the variations noted in Chart 3 are regional linguistic features (i.e. other dialect forms), historical AAVE features that have dropped out of widespread use, or literary modifications of black vernacular speech rules. For a discussion of the complexities involved in this type of linguistic classification, see John Rickford, African American Vernacular English (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1999).

English "for" and gal in place of the Standard English "girl." The degree of difference conveyed by these two words pales in comparison to the eight distinctive literary dialect markers in the two Aesops fable regional translations offered by Johnson and Harris Dickson.[116]

The Oxford English Dictionary defines "gal" as: "[r]epresenting a colloquial or regional (U.S. or southern English) pronunciation of GIRL."[117] The term can function as

---

116 James Weldon Johnson's and Harris Dickson's depictions of New York and Mississippi Negro dialect are useful benchmarks to highlight Hughes's lack of dialect variation in his blues poems set in those same two places. Johnson and Dickson were working from the same source text, and with the same rules: "Each writer was asked to keep the text so far as consistent with the dialect he was presenting, to make no pretense at 'literary' improvement, yet not to hesitate to change order and language when they were not inherently natural to the Negro of his particular section." The idea was that the two writers would come up with appreciably different results, which they in fact did. Johnson's New York dialect example reads as follows:

> N'ole crab said to her son one day, "W'at you doin' walkin' sideways like dat' Y'oughter always walk straight wid yuh toes turned out."
>
> De little crab said, "You show me how to walk, I'll do my best.
>
> D'ole crab tried her bes' to walk straight, but couldn't do no better d'n de little one. W'en she tried to turn her toes out she fell over on her nose.

Dickson's Mississipi example reads this way:

> "Son, how come you walk sideways like dat?" says ole Ma Crab to her boy. "You oughter travel straight ahead wid yo' toes turnt out."
>
> "Show me de way you does it?" de little crab axed he ma, "cause I aims to learn."
>
> So ole Ma Crab she tried an' she tried, but jest couldn't contrive to manage all dem foots. Doin' her level best she rambles off sideways. An' when she 'tempted to turn out dem extry toes, dey got all tangled, an' flung Ma down on de groun.

For more detail on these literary depictions of regional speech, see Hibbard, "Aesop in Negro Dialect," 496-7.

117 The OED's etymological examples are as diverse as gal's first noted use in a 1795 grammar text's list of "vulgarisms," an 1824 cockney use in a collection of humorous anecdotes by a London newspaper reporter, an 1836 use in Dickens's The Pickwick Papers, and a 1927 use in a local color dialect piece called Congaree Sketches by C. L. Adams: "[d]ey torment de little gal so till one day she swallow a handful of bottle glass." Accessed September 12, 2010.

a region marker in 1927, though it may simply signal colloquial speech depending on context. This connotative indeterminacy is exactly the point. Hughes's blues poems speakers' AAVE was not entirely uniform, but nonetheless was a literary dialect in which it was impossible to identify what was distinctively southern or rural in a speech form stereotypically branded as both. The "Aesop in Negro Dialect" article posited that more accurate representations of regional differences in black speech were necessary to challenge the racist uses to which Negro dialect had been put. Hughes's blues poems posited that linguistic diversity was not the only way to create dignity in black folk speakers. The poet's use of dialect in Fine Clothes did not draw a sharp line of demarcation between what northern and southern or urban and rural speech sounded like—a choice which, because of Hughes's ingenious decision to put dialect into the mouths of urbanites, itself challenged the notion that dialect could only suggest a single type of black life and experience.

Arnold Rampersad noted that in Fine Clothes, "dialect would only be incidental to the major initiative of Hughes in the question of poetic form."[118] This assertion is true one sense and false in another. Dialect does not shape form in Fine Clothes, but it does shape the character of the book's speakers because it helps determine which kind of blues (folk or classic) they were creating. The apparent artlessness of Hughes's blues poems contained some very radical innovations. The blues poems positioned rural culture as central to urban creative achievement, and demonstrated that black authors did not have to eschew dialect to challenge the prevailing racist associations with it; they simply had to re-locate distinctively black speech into a place where it was thought not to thrive, and show that it was relevant. Hughes could have used dialect to mark the outsider status of

118 Rampersad, "Langston Hughes's Fine Clothes," 146.

his characters—to highlight their alienation in urban space. But he complicated the issues of dialect and alienation by making them both universal. The shared blues lament allowed the linguistic and cultural outsider to become the insider in Fine Clothes—the "country" in the city, remaking itself on its own terms.

THE CITY IN THE COUNTRY: RURAL LITERARY REUSE

In addition to creating a new poetic space for rural culture within the modern city, Hughes, like so many other New Negro writers, decided to see black rural life firsthand on an extended visit to the American South. The young poet arrived in Alabama in August of 1927, and his Tuskegee reading was noteworthy because of the buzz it generated on campus.[119] A reporter who attended was underwhelmed by Hughes's poetry, but quite impressed with the poet's unaffected demeanor; he noted that the poet "may not have sold his verse, but he sold himself."[120] Asked to write a poem to commemorate his visit, Hughes penned a tribute to the college's founder, the late Booker T. Washington, that was printed on the cover of the Tuskegee Messenger, Tuskegee's widely distributed journal:

> **Alabama Earth** (at Booker Washington's grave)
>
> Deep in Alabama earth
> His buried body lies—
> But higher than the singing pines
> And taller than the skies
> And out of Alabama earth
> To all the world there goes
> The truth a simple heart has held
> And the strength a strong hand knows,

---

119 Hughes's reading was on August 10th. Rampersad, The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume 1, 152.

120 Tuskegee Messenger, September 10, 1927. Quoted in Rampersad, Life of Langston Hughes, Vol. 1, 152.

While over Alabama earth
These words are gently spoken:
Serve—and hate will die unborn.
Love—and chains are broken.[121]

Even a decade after its founder's death, Tuskegee was still a lodestar of black rural uplift in America, promoting industrial and agricultural education for students and extension work in rural communities. Hughes was an unlikely poet for the job of commemorating the school, in part because his first big literary break (and many of his subsequent publications) were thanks to the Crisis, the NAACP journal edited by Washington's chief rival, W. E. B. Du Bois. Hampton's Southern Workman journal reprinted three of Hughes's poems from the Crisis in the 1920s, but that was a far cry from entrusting him to compose an anthem for their agricultural and industrial school. Also, despite his tenure at rural Lincoln University, Hughes was known as an urban poet—part of the Harlem in-crowd that included such luminaries as Claude McKay, Rudolph Fisher, Aaron Douglass, Bruce Nugent, and the notorious Carl Van Vechten. Tuskegee sponsored a Wednesday reading series during the summer school session, which gave the school plenty of noted black writers to ask for poems; Tuskegee chose Hughes, and he agreed to fulfill the request. Ultimately, the Tuskegee publication was important enough to Hughes that he chose to include a copy of the Tuskegee Messenger cover with his poem when he applied for a Harmon Foundation award in 1930 for Distinguished Achievement in Negro Literature. He included the cover along with his two book manuscripts and the poem "A House in Taos," which had won the Poetry Society of America's contest for undergraduate poets.

Figure 1: Photograph of Jessie Fauset, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston in front of a statue of Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee, 1927

121 "Alabama Earth" was first published in the Tuskegee Messenger in June of 1928.

Source: Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Call Number: JWJ MSS 26. Box: 458. Folder: 11074. Source title: "Photograph of Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes and Jessie Fauset, 1927, Tuskegee Summer."

Hughes liked Tuskegee so well that he visited its founder's grave, and met with the famous and reclusive black botanist George Washington Carver, a faculty member, who showed the young poet the paintings of plants that he did in his spare time. Concerned that he had only seen the urban South, Hughes got permission to travel into

the Alabama backcountry with Tuskegee's Moveable School Force, a rural outreach program that Carver started back in 1896.[122]

Tuskegee's Movable School Force had begun in a stagecoach and wagon, but by 1927 its faculty traveled in trucks, each equipped with a generator because many of the rural areas they visited had no electricity. Hughes rode into the country on a big white Tuskegee truck, and lived with a rural couple and their ten children while the community members received copies of Tuskegee publications and USDA Farmers Bulletins, and learned how to apply the newest scientific principles to their day-to-day work. Arnold Rampersad wrote about the particular subjects taught during Hughes's visit, and the positive impression they made on the young poet:

> Women were taught to care for babies and typhoid patients, to bake bread, and to can fruits and vegetables. While younger boys cleared the ground, the local men constructed, under careful supervision, a toilet. Many of the people had never seen a motion picture. One evening, to disbelieving cries of "Look a yonder!," the Force showed health and education films to over a hundred people, then ended the meeting with a lecture on toilets ("But what could be needed more in the community?" Hughes scribbled in his notebook).[123]

Hughes himself, in addition to eating meals with his host family, swam in the river, accompanied the older boys at their daily work, taught the younger children how to blow soap bubbles with spools, and delivered an evening speech on Great Men, "with greater emphasis on Great Negroes."[124] He returned to New York at the end of that summer with

---

122 D. B. Mayberry, "The Tuskegee Moveable School: A Unique Contribution to National and International Agriculture and Rural Development." Agricultural History 65.2 "The Land-Grant Colleges: A Centennial View" (Spring 1991): 86-7.

123 Rampersad, Life of Langston Hughes Vol. 1, 152.

124 Rampersad, Life of Langston Hughes, Vol. 1, 152.

a wealth of stories, song lyrics, and experiences in the country, which some of his friends encouraged him to use as the basis for his next book.[125]

As successful as Hughes's visit to the rural South was in 1927, it was his print publications (not his brief speaking tour) that made the biggest impression on rural audiences. In the 1920s, Hughes worked hard to publish most of his poems individually before they came out in volumes such as The Weary Blues or Fine Clothes to the Jew,; as a result, his work was widely circulated to a diverse readership.[126] During that decade, Hughes published at least fifteen poems in rural journals, including the newspaper of his rural college, Lincoln University; at least one of Hughes's poems was circulated by the Associated Negro Press, a content service started by a Tuskegee alumnus to provide material to the proliferation of black newspapers and journals springing up across the country.[127] Despite the splash caused by his in-person appearances in the rural South in 1927, Hughes's poetic reach into rural America came primarily via city-based

---

125 Hughes, "Journals: 1920-1937." Langston Hughes Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beninecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Box: 586.

126 Langston Hughes's 1920s periodical publications included: Crisis, Amsterdam News, Les Continents (Paris), Southern Workman, World Tomorrow, Opportunity, Survey Graphic, Vanity Fair, Messenger, Current Opinion, Africa South, Workers Monthly, Buccaneer, Reflexus, American Life, Palms, Herald Tribune (New York), New Republic, Modern Quarterly, Measure, Literary Digest, Poetry, FIRE!, Lincoln University News, New Masses, Saturday Review of Literature, Bookman, Harlem, Messenger (Tuskegee), Columbia University Spectator, and Library (Roswell, NM). Hughes also published children's poems in Brownie's Book and Carolina Magazine.

127 A 1921 university study identified 492 black papers in 38 states (76 of which were based in the country's twelve largest cities). Patrick S. Washburn, The African American Newspaper: Voice of Freedom (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern UP, 2006): 121. When the Associated Negro Press started in 1919, it sold subscriptions to almost eighty major black weekly newspapers, and several daily publications; the number of subscribers grew steadily over the next two decades. Lawrence D. Hogan, A Black National News Service (Cranberry, New Jersey: Associated UP, 1984): 57.

publications, which counted on outlying areas for subscriptions, and had tremendous pass-along reading rates in rural areas—particularly as black adult literacy rates climbed above 70% in the 1920s. Rural blacks who could not afford (or did not have access to) Hughes's volumes of poetry, or the new black poetry anthologies that featured his work,[128] were able to read his poems and essays in the pages of black urban journals such as the Crisis, Opportunity, and the Messenger, as well as newspapers such as New York's Herald Tribune, which circulated to a broad regional readership in order to stay profitable. Despite harassment and attempts at censorship by the Bureau of Investigation (later renamed the FBI), the Post Office, and local officials, even the most controversial black publications made their way into rural America, often with the help of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, whose membership regularly smuggled bundles of newspapers and journals on board and dropped them out of railroad cars at pre-arranged spots along their train routes for local blacks to pick up and distribute.[129]

The circuits that Hughes's poems wound through rural America did not stop with those urban newspapers and journals. Rural publications frequently reprinted content from urban publications and news bureaus, and transformed those pieces by context and

---

128 Such as the 1925 edition of The New Negro, the 1927 Simon and Schuster edition Four Negro Poets edited by Alain Locke, W. S. Braithwaite's Anthology of Magazine Verse (Y: G. Sully, 1927), or Ebony and Topaz edited by C.S. Johnson (NY: National Urban League, 1927).

129 When advertisers wanted to reach black people across the country, they placed ads in major metropolitan newspapers, knowing that the official subscriptions and underground "pass-along" distribution would get their message out to rural as well as urban readers. Good examples of this scope were the Chicago Defender and the acclaimed Pittsburgh Courier. By 1916, two thirds of the Chicago Defender's paper sales came from 71 towns and cities, most of them in the South. The Courier, which expanded from a circulation of 50,000 in 1926 to four editions (local, northern, southern, and eastern), distributed to every state and a number of foreign countries by 1930. Washburn, 88, 131-3.

commentary. One example of this type of rural re-use is the Cardinal's Notebook, which in 1930 reprinted Hughes's "A Song to a Negro Wash-woman," a poem that was originally published in the Crisis in January of 1925.[130] Hughes's poem about the wash-woman ended with the lines "For you I have many songs to make/could I but find the words":

A Song to a Negro Wash-woman

Oh, wash-woman,
Arms elbow-deep in white suds,
Soul washed clean,
Clothes washed clean—
I have many songs to sing to you
Could I but find the words.
Was it four o'clock or six o'clock on a winter afternoon,
I saw you wringing out the last shirt in Miss White
Lady's kitchen? Was it four o'clock or six o'clock?
I don't remember.

But I know, at seven one spring morning you were on
Vermont Street with a bundle in your arms going to
wash clothes.
And I know I've seen you in a New York subway train in
the late afternoon coming home from washing clothes.

Yes, I know you, wash-woman.
I know how you send your children to school, and high-
school, and even college.
I know how hard you work and help your man when times are
hard.
I know how you built your house up from the wash-tub and
call it home.
And how you raise your churches from white suds for the
service of the Holy God.

And I've seen you singing, wash-woman. Out in the back-
yard garden under the apple trees, singing, hanging

130 Crisis (January, 1925): 115.

white clothes on long lines in the sun-shine.
And I've seen you in church a Sunday morning singing,
praising your Jesus, because some day you're going to
sit on the right hand of the Son of God and forget
you were ever a wash-woman. And the aching back and
the bundles of clothes will be unremembered then.
Yes, I've seen you singing.

And for you,
O singing wash-woman,
For you, singing little brown woman,
Singing strong black woman,
Singing tall yellow woman,
Arms deep in white suds,
Soul clean,
Clothes clean,—
For you I have many songs to make
Could I but find the words.[131]

Hughes's conceit of poetic insufficiency magnified the importance of his homespun subject—a move that resonated with the rural teachers and high school students of the Cardinal Gibbons Institute who edited this journal in Ridge, Maryland. They gave his poem pride of place on the back cover of their "Emancipation Number" in February.

The few extant issues of the Cardinal's Notebook suggest that the editors regularly included poetry, but reserved the back cover for writing that was thematically related to the focus of the issue as a whole.[132] For example, the Lent 1930 issue focused on cleanliness of body and spirit, and included articles on the Health Campaign of the rural Extension service, the importance of fasting as a Christian spiritual discipline, and

131 Cardinal's Notebook 2.4 (February 1930): 16.

132 The Library of Congress does not list this (or any other African American publication from St. Mary's County, Maryland in the 1920s and '30s) in its catalog; these copies are part of the school principal's application for a William E. Harmon Award for Distinguished Achievement Among Negroes, 1930, in the "Farming and Rural Life" category. Harmon Foundation Collection, 1930 award application files, folder title: "Daniel, Victor Hugo."

the rural dental clinic the school was organizing for poor children with the help of three local dentists and a physician. Its back cover featured a paragraph from the editors on the importance of routines and cleanliness in promoting health, followed by excerpts from an article by Herman N. Bundesen, M.D., from the December 1928 issue of Successful Farming:

> Every farm household, and every individual living in a farming community, have their part in sanitation. Clean clothing, clean furniture, clean homes, and clean buildings depend upon the efforts which individuals will exert toward securing them....You in the country may lack certain pleasures that we have in the city but where good health is found, all else is of lesser value. So accept these God-given, health-bringing blessings, in order that by being healthy yourselves, you may make the community in which you dwell equally as healthy.

The back cover of the Cardinal's Notebook was a place to summarize and reiterate all of the important ideas that the issue contained. It was not a place for ambiguity or subtlety.

Hughes's poem was five stanzas long, and, even in small type, took up the entire back cover of the Cardinal's Notebook, leaving no room for editorial commentary and explanation. But just in case readers missed the connection of Hughes's poem to the larger work of the Emancipation Number, the editors made this plain in the long piece they wrote for the issue, entitled "Put Your Antecedents To Work."[133] Following articles by Carter Woodson on black history, and Victor Hugo Daniel (the school's principal) on freedom, and a long biographical piece on the local self-made farmer John Thomas, the editors explained just how Hughes's poem connected to the larger themes of black history and uplift:

> The next question, which might bring forth a variety of answers, is, "What constitutes good antecedents?" Is poverty a poor antecedent? Not necessarily. Is ignorance a poor antecedent? Yes. Is lack of education synonymous with ignorance? No. Stop here and read Langston Hughes' "Song to a Negro Wash-

133 Cardinal's Notebook 2.4 (January 1930): 9-11.

> woman." You will find it on page 16. Here is poverty and lack of education, but not ignorance. To our mind the outstanding glory of Negro achievement since Emancipation is not the millions made in hair grease, the occasional imported car or Japanese maid, not the economic progress of which these are an indication. The real achievement is the production of the "singing little brown woman," "singing strong black woman," "singing tall yellow woman" and their masculine counterparts, who recognize their own limitations and are willing to sweat blood to give their children a chance to rid themselves of these same limitations. As antecedents we should rate these "singing soldiers" and their humble lives, one hundred per cent.[134]

The editors of the Cardinal's Notebook viewed Hughes's literary work as intimately connected to both the intellectual and physical rural uplift work they were doing, and identified with the working-class black subjects he created. The editors extended Hughes's logic to claim that his poetic tribute applied to working-class men as well, the "masculine counterparts" of the poem's African American women of all sizes and colors.

Making a connection between creative writing and the workaday realities of rural life was an editorial priority of the Cardinal's Notebook, as were accentuating the positive aspects of life in the country and promoting the Christian faith. The editors chose to feature Paul Laurence Dunbar's 1896 poem "The Poet and His Song" in the column titled "The Amen Corner" in their April 1930 issue, along with a quote about promoting better farm conditions from Rural America magazine, and excerpts from an article from the National Catholic Welfare Council Review about the Catholic Church's concern at the dearth of rural health and education service providers. The speaker of Dunbar's four-stanza poem (reduced to three stanzas, and with italics added in the last couplet of the Cardinal's Notebook reprint) talked about the joy of singing while tending cattle, pruning trees, harvesting grain in the hot sun, and accepting the occasional blight that destroyed his crops. Dunbar's speaker also discussed the anonymity of his songs:

---

134 Cardinal's Notebook 2.4 (January 1930): 10.

There are no ears to hear my lays,
No lips to lift a word of praise;
But still, with faith unfaltering,
I live and laugh and love and sing.
What matters yon unheeding throng?
They cannot feel my spirit's spell,
Since life is sweet and love is long,
I sing my song, and all is well.[135]

Where Hughes's poem treated the limits of language, and presented the possibility that the dearth of praise poems about the black working class was the result of poets' feelings of inadequacy when confronted with such worthy and multifaceted subjects, Dunbar's poem reflected on creative isolation and the limits of audience in a rural locale. Dunbar's poem suggested that many rural working class songs did in fact exist, but were ignored or overlooked by the wider society, the "unheeding throng." The Cardinal's Notebook editors did not comment explicitly on what relationship they saw between their readers and Dunbar's lone poetic speaker, but their choice to juxtapose Dunbar's poem with quotes about rural uplift and isolation made it easy for their readers to see a parallel between their own struggles and those of the poetic speaker, who also persisted in doing creative work in the countryside without much praise or attention.

The African Americans in St. Mary's County who read Dunbar's and Hughes's poems in the Cardinal's Notebook were no strangers to hard, uncelebrated work. The majority of adult African Americans in the county worked as sharecroppers or tenant farmers. According to the 1930 census, although almost 55% of the population lived on farms, only 13.3% of the farmland in the county was owned by colored farmers.[136] And

---

135 Cardinal's Notebook 2.5 (April 1930): 13.

136 The "colored" census category at that time included "Indian, Chinese, Japanese, and all other races" as well as African Americans. But in 1920, there was only one person in St. Mary's County who fit any of the former categories; the 1930 census reported no people of "other races" as living in the county. Historical Census Browser,

most of the 305 black-owned farms were smaller than the county average—just 73 acres. Most African Americans in St. Mary's County either had a hardscrabble existence working on farms owned by whites, or a hardscrabble existence as independent farmers working small tracts of land and relying heavily on subsistence crops to make up for the small size of their cash crops. The Cardinal Gibbons Institute was located in a predominantly Catholic tobacco farming region—where one third of the whites and half of the blacks were illiterate. The United States Department of Agriculture described St. Mary's County as "the most primitive county in the agricultural methods in the United States."[137] In the 1920s, before the Cardinal Gibbons Institute started intervening with health outreach programs, poor hygiene and lack of access to medical care helped cause St. Mary's County to have the highest death rate in the country.

Hard work was the norm in the surrounding black community, and the Cardinal Gibbons Institute extended its own hard work far beyond the classroom, onto the farmsteads and into the tobacco fields that dominated the rural landscape. Opened in 1924, the Institute was one answer to both the profoundly limited educational opportunities for rural African Americans and the Catholic Church's lax evangelization efforts in black communities.[138] The school offered an innovative combination of academic, religious, and vocational instruction to all of its students. Funded initially by

---

University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center. Retrieved May 6, 2010. <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html>

137 Cecilia A. Moore, "To 'Be of Some Good to Ourselves and Everybody Else': The Mission of the Cardinal Gibbons Institute, 1924-1934," U.S. Catholic Historian 16.3 (Summer 1998): 48.

138 The school was one of only 41 Catholic secondary schools in the country for African Americans. "Fund-raising Survey, Analysis, and Plan for the Cardinal Gibbons Institute," Prepared by the John Price Jones Corporation, 150 Nassau Street, New York, New York, March 1931. The John LaFarge Papers, Box 28, Folder 4, Georgetown University Special Collections: 19.

$46,000 from Archbishop James Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore, the National Board of Directors of the Knights of Columbus, and donations from African Americans in the local community and in a handful of large cities, the Institute's starting capital was nearly three times the annual budget of all the local colored schools combined.[139] Before the Cardinal Gibbons Institute opened, colored schools in St. Mary's County only received about 26 percent of the monies allocated to their white counterparts, although blacks made up 40 percent of the population. Colored public schools received fewer dollars for routine expenses such as teacher salaries, building rent, books, furniture, and cleaning and painting, and had no budget allocations for many things that the white schools in the county regularly received: salaries for an attendance officer and a County Extension Worker (who taught in the white schools), libraries, supplies such as stationery and postage, and office equipment such as telephones.[140] Jennifer Ritterhouse noted that such educational inequities were more typical of the deep South, where:

> Few southern communities even provided black public high schools prior to the 1920s, and in the mid-1930s, when more than 50 percent of white southern teenagers aged fourteen to seventeen were enrolled in high school, the comparable figures for black southern teenagers was less than 20 percent (in some states less than 10).[141]

From the outset, the Cardinal Gibbons Institute did more than teach academic subjects to its students. Following the community outreach model first developed by

---

139 St. Mary's Beacon, "Treasurer of Board of Education's annual fiscal report for 1924" (December 12, 1924): total disbursements for Colored Schools was $16,753.94, and total disbursements for White Schools was $63,367.35.

140 The St. Mary's Beacon,"Annual Financial Statement of Geo. W. Joy, Treasurer Board of Education, for the Fiscal Year Ended July 3Ist, 1917" (December 20, 1917) noted expenditures for white and colored schools. 28 line items for the white schools (total expenditures= $32,867.05); 8 line items for colored schools (total expenditures = $7,699.43).

141 Ritterhouse, 183.

black industrial and agricultural colleges, its Tuskegee-trained principals organized farmers meetings, supported local agricultural improvement projects such as turkey raising and the introduction of vegetable gardens, and ran a health campaign in St. Mary's and the neighboring Charles Counties. As the school's assistant principal and journal editor, Constance Daniel, wrote in a county newspaper article in 1930 (the same year the school journal published Hughes's poem), what happened inside the Institute was intimately tied to the school's work in the larger community:

> The value of that school of today which teaches A, B, C, D, E, however perfectly, but takes no thought and makes no preparation for the tomorrows of its pupils and their families, is open to question. The Institute is endeavoring to develop reliable, alert and progressive citizens and simultaneously to develop and improve the surroundings from which many of its pupils come, and to which many of them should and will return.[142]

The teaching of poetry at school was connected to rural community uplift—and the Cardinal's Notebook helped make that outreach happen by taking the intellectual work of the school out into the community. This kind of print outreach was particularly important as the main local paper, the St. Mary's Beacon, primarily covered the doings of local whites. News about black people rarely graced the pages of the local weekly, whose editors saw fit to publish approximately 60 items in each issue detailing the births, deaths, weddings, illnesses, courtships, vacations, houseguests, and even the automobile purchases of local white residents. African American events were consigned to the proverbial footnotes in the local press—single lines about "Colored" events at the bottom of large notices about festivities for local whites, and periodic small ads for dances at the Colored Hall in Leonardtown or at St. George's Parish Hall in Valley Lee. What the

142 1930 St. Mary's Beacon article, reprinted in the Harmon application file of Victor Daniel. "William E. Harmon Award for Distinguished Achievement Among Negroes," Harmon Foundation, Inc. Records, 1913-1967, Library of Congress ("Award Program" series).

paper did run were ads for Cocotone Skin Whitener and hair straighteners, a long-running wanted ad looking for a local black man accused of murder, and occasional, brief death notices for black male citizens (always missing the condolences offered by the editors to the white families who had lost a loved one). Although published only five times a year, the Cardinal's Notebook offered an important alternative, as it focused on contemporary African American literature, rural life, and local school and community events.

The teachers at the Cardinal Gibbons Institute saw their rural improvement work as intimately connected to urban black uplift, but adapted those city initiatives to the distinctive needs and circumstances of rural people—just as they adapted urban literature for the needs of their audience. Health Week was one of those modern urban initiatives that needed modifications to work in the country. In the city, black people could ride a streetcar or drive their Model T to daily meetings in warm church halls or auditoriums to listen to lectures on community sanitation, mobilization, and adult diseases. In the country, it took more than a week to visit all the far-flung participating households. And as Hughes learned on his trip with Tuskegee's Moveable School Force, making home improvements also took more time in the country than it did in town because living conditions for most rural black people were so basic. As Constance Daniel wrote,

> But how about the country? Let us see, let us see. Here is H. J. who in 1929 had a rating of 0 on his privy, and A. C. who had 50, and K. L. with 60. Will an hour's work put their arrangements into proper condition? Oh, no! Because an 0, (and there are so many 0's) in the Institute's campaign records means that there is no privy on which to give a rating! H. J. probably needs to do a good bit of carpentering, some screening, and almost surely some whitewashing. No, an hour won't go very far here. These jobs may mean all day, or several days.[143]

---

143 1930 St. Mary's Beacon article, reprinted in Harmon application file of Victor Daniel. "William E. Harmon Award for Distinguished Achievement Among Negroes," Harmon Foundation, Inc. Records, 1913-1967, Library of Congress ("Award Program" series).

In the final week of the Institute's two-month-long rural health campaign, the work of each black household was recorded on an official scoring sheet that graded in five categories: Kitchen, Garden, Front Yard, Back Yard, and Privy.[144]The Institute's publications made it plain that they were promoting cooperative work, not offering charity. Just as the negro wash-woman celebrated by Hughes was expected to "sweat blood" if necessary to better the lives of herself and her children, so to were the rural black neighbors that the school reached out to (more than 350 families in 1929) expected to work hard to improve their living conditions, whether that meant a mother scrubbing and disinfecting a kitchen and outhouse, or sewing muslin or gingham curtains to beautify a home; a father building screen doors or digging beds for a new garden; or the children swatting flies or picking up tin cans and other household trash in order to win prizes from school officials.

The Cardinal Gibbons Institute reworked urban reform programs such as Health Week, and the Cardinal's Notebook reworked urban literature to suit the needs of its rural audience. In the case of Dunbar's poem, the change was wrought primarily by juxtaposition. In the case of Hughes's poem, editorial commentary forged the link between the poetic subject and the journal's readers. Both of these poems were presented in such a way that they ultimately celebrated rural life, but the Cardinal's Notebook also included literature that promoted rural outmigration—although that literature was presented in a very different manner. The April 1930 issue included a gloss of John Davis's short story "Escape," and noted that it was published "in the March number of Opportunity, journal of the National Urban League."[145] The author, Constance Daniel,

144 "Inspection Sheet," Health for the Farmer. Fifth Annual Health Campaign (Ridge, MD: Cardinal Gibbons Institute, 1929).

145 Cardinal's Notebook 2.5 (April 1930): 5.

spent the first two paragraphs of her story describing (rather than quoting) Davis's story of racial peonage, and commenting on the truthfulness of his distressing fictional account of life in the plantation South. She then devoted the remaining fifteen paragraphs of her column to coverage of a real-life plantation in Mississippi with very different race relations and living conditions. Instead of quoting the Davis story, the Cardinal's Notebook article on "Escape" included paragraph after paragraph detailing what a Triangle newspaper reporter actually saw on his visit to the real-life Matagorda plantation, which included a Rosenwald School building, a community center, a new church being built, at least eight fruit trees at every house, every house painted and fitted with screen doors, and every family possessing a garden, a pig, a cow, and a sewing machine.

Daniel devoted the final two paragraphs of her "Escape" article to direct commentary on the "practical Christianity" of which she thought the Matagorda plantation was an exemplar, drawing a clear distinction between paternalism and good farm management (which required meaningful black participation in governance[146]):

> Whatever his motive, all credit should be his for having put tnto [sic] operation, a sane, progressive program for his tenants, free from the stultifying influence of the paternalism too often confused with "good conditions" in the South.... Education, sanitation and the development of leaders from among themselves,

---

146 Steven Hahn, in his history of African American grassroots politics from slavery to the 1910s, argued for "a broad notion of [African American rural] politics...that encompasses collective struggles for what might be termed socially meaningful power." He contended that bi-racial coalitions (such at the one forged at Matagorda) were one way that African American agricultural laborers in the rural South constituted themselves as self-governing citizens, although intra-community reliance (particularly on kinship networks) and self-help more often proved to be the most effective means to acquire land, increase literacy, and promote full civic participation. Steven Hahn, A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003): 3-7.

> provide the only real means of escape from the abuses which too frequently surround the Negro laborer.[147]

Daniel's article was not a happy-go-lucky denial of racism in the rural South. She used Davis's Opportunity story as a means to both affirm the existence of racial oppression in rural America and to offer a vivid and positive counter-narrative of black rural life. In so doing, she positioned her rural journal as an informed and objective respondent to the urban publications that the Cardinal's Notebook audiences were also likely to be reading.

The fact that the Cardinal's Notebook editors used a different approach to Hughes's poetry is a testimony to the high regard in which his depictions of working-class life were held at the rural school, a regard that manifested itself in the Negro History Week presentation made by eleven students on January 9th, 1930 (a month before the school journal reprinted his "Song to a Negro Wash-woman"). Negro History Week was still a relatively new holiday in 1930, started just four years earlier by Carter G. Woodson, Hughes's former boss in Washington D.C.[148] But the eleven students at Cardinal Gibbons Institute went all-out for the celebration, and put on a multi-part program for the whole school which mentioned a number of poets by name in the third section of the presentation, a symposium "on the New Negro." The symposium noted "Kelly Miller, Braithwaite, Rosamond and James Weldon Johnson, McKay, Cullen, Hughes, Walter White, Jessie Fausett, Benjamin Brawley and Paul Robeson," and demonstrated the students' familiarity with the New Negro movement, which they characterized as a creative endeavor. The Cardinal's Notebook coverage of the program also demonstrated the student body's familiarity with several of the artists (including Hughes) by referring to them by only their last names.[149]

---

147 Cardinal's Notebook 2.5 (April 1930): 7.

148 Rampersad, The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume 1, 140.

149 Cardinal's Notebook 2.5 (April 1930): 12.

The Negro History Week presentation at the Cardinal Gibbons Institute bore some resemblance to Hughes's speech on "Great Men" to the rural audience outside of Tuskegee, Alabama in 1927. But unlike the children in Hughes's Alabama audience, the students at the Cardinal Gibbons Institute were already aware of the existence of many "Great Negroes" in American history, and did not mistakenly include Abraham Lincoln among them. The Cardinal Gibbons students began their Negro History Week celebration with a presentation on great Negro leaders of the past ("Washington, Dunbar, Banneker and Douglass"), followed by a tribute to helpful white people (most prominently Abraham Lincoln and Moorfield Storey, the first president of the NAACP), then showcased the present artistic uplift of the New Negroes, and ended their show with skits about three other notable black contemporaries: the classical musician and composer Harry Burleigh, Tuskegee faculty member George Washington Carver (a friend of Constance and Victor Daniel's who visited the school and gave master classes to the students),[150] and the recently deceased Trinitarian priest Augustine Derrick (who toured the country in the 1920s as part of his special apostolate to African American Catholic groups).

In Hughes's 1940 autobiography, The Big Sea, the poet mistakenly asserted that "[t]he ordinary Negroes hadn't heard of the Negro Renaissance. And if they had, it hadn't raised their wages any."[151]Despite the prevailing idea that Harlem was the center of the black literary and cultural universe, the Cardinal Gibbons Institute students saw New Negro creative work as relevant to their own day-to-day lives in the country—demonstrated by their Negro History Week program and the poetry they included in their school journal. Hughes and the other New Negro writers and artists were put in a separate

150 Moore, 55.

151 Langston Hughes, The Big Sea (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993): 228.

category from other black leaders, but were still held as important enough to include in the students' historical tribute. These rural Maryland schoolchildren clearly expected the artistic influence of the urban New Negro writers to be as historically transformative for rural America as that of the most influential black abolitionist, agricultural scientist, and rural educational reformer.

TIME AND MATERIALS

"For you I have many songs to make/could I but find the words." Hughes's final lines in "Song to a Negro Wash-woman" function for me as a gloss on the problem confronting scholars who want to pay tribute to the literary contributions of rural blacks in the 1920s: the literal dearth of words from which to work. Because most rural African American publications in the 1920s were short-lived, and so few copies have been preserved, it is impossible to accurately gauge the influence of Langston Hughes's poetry in rural America, or make any reasonable claims about any differences that might have existed in urban and rural poetic taste. What we can surmise, based on the responses to Hughes and his work in the Tuskegee Messenger and the Cardinal's Notebook, is that the rural response was not one of simple, unquestioning acceptance or deference to urban artistic standards and themes.

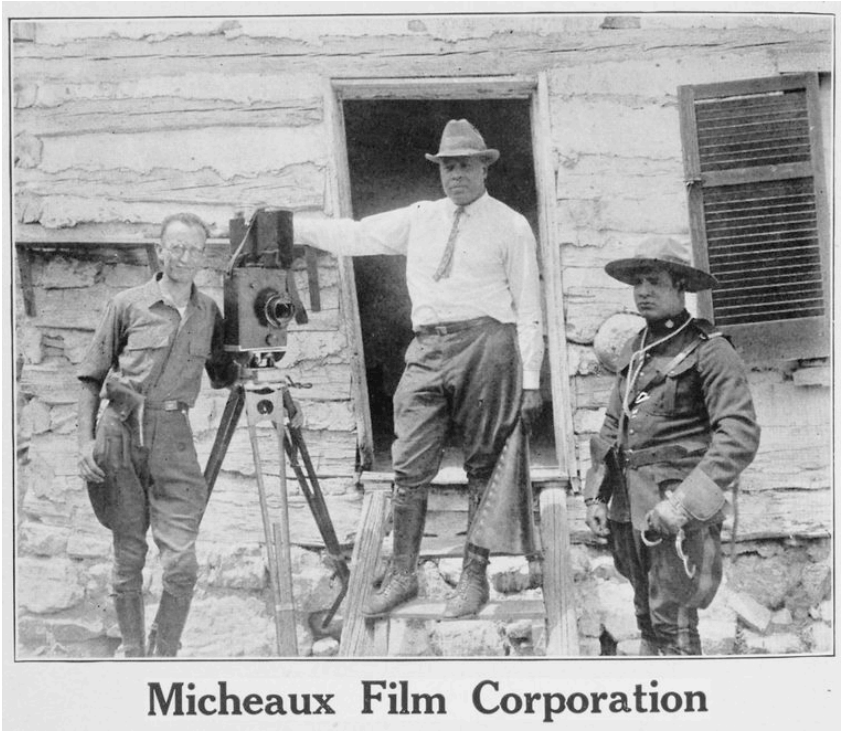
Hughes painstakingly devised a poetic form that registered the specificities of social experience and social change, and also demonstrated how forms, styles, and vocabularies could be appropriated and reappropriated, recombined and reapplied. The readiness of the Cardinal's Notebook staff to perform these same operations on Hughes's own poem suggest that he succeeded—not just in creating a poetic form, but in exemplifying how his readers could re-claim and reuse poetry according to models that were already part of their experience.

What the Tuskegee Messenger and the Cardinal's Notebook suggest is that the rural norm was evaluation and creative re-use. Rural editors from agricultural and industrial schools reprinted Hughes's poems in ways that paid tribute to the black rural life they were working hard to preserve and improve. Their selection of which of Hughes's poems to publish, critiques of his poetry, direct requests to the poet himself, juxtaposition of poetic and "real-life" materials, and explicit interpretations of the meanings of his poems were all ways of re-making the work of an urban poet for a rural audience.

Although Hughes would later revise many of his opinions of the rural South in general (and the influence of Booker T. Washington and industrial and agricultural education for black people in particular), in the 1920s the young poet was making country blues an important part of the urban black literary story. At the same time, people in the country were reading and refashioning his poems to make them a part of modern black rural life.

Chapter 3. Oscar Micheaux: Rural Life, Audiences, and Aesthetics

Figure 2: "Micheaux Film Corporation; Producers and Distributors of high class Negro feature photoplays."



Source: Simms' blue book and national Negro business and professional directory; James N. Simms, compiler and publisher. Halftone photomechanical print, Page 80. New York Public Library, Catalog Call Number: Sc 650.58-S (Simms, J. Simms' blue book). Digital ID: 1223183. Record ID: 56.

Because so many of his films from the 1920s have been lost, the ad that writer and filmmaler Oscar Micheaux placed in the 1923 Simms' Blue Book and National Negro Business and Professional Directory becomes more important as a means of understanding the early professional identity forged by the artist. The photograph of Micheaux sticks out like a sore thumb in the context of Simms' business directory, in part because it linked the artist to rural space rather than to urban gentility, and in part because it linked him to the West. In the image, Micheaux stands on a plank step with his cowboy

hat on, holds his director's megaphone in his left hand, and rests his other hand on top of the movie camera to his right. Lower down in the frame are two men (presumably employees), both standing on the ground: a white camera operator in an open-collared shirt and work boots, leaning casually against the camera; and an actor in a western military costume, holding a pair of open handcuffs and gazing off into the distance. Behind the three men is the rough-hewn wall of a cabin, the open door of which makes a slanted black backdrop that frames Micheaux in sharp relief. The caption under the photograph reads "Micheaux Film Corporation; Producers and Distributors of high class Negro feature photoplays." In this image, by virtue of his high, central position and the fact that he literally has his hands on all the film production equipment, Micheaux is depicted as is in full control of his moving pictures.

By contrast, most of the Simms directory's 88 images are formal studio portraits of elite African Americans divorced from workaday concerns, and exterior shots of their expensive homes, vehicles, and places of business. The portraits tend to show their human subjects posed inside in formal attire, while the real estate images accentuate the large scale and grandeur of the buildings—primarily by including entire fascades rather than focusing on specific architectural details such as walls or doorways. Micheaux's photo is unique because it is one of only five action shots featuring people at work, and one of only three portraits obviously set outside.[1] Most of the photographs of black

1 The other action shots are of a doctor taking an x-ray, a former tenant farmer in front of a school building with a class, Booker T. Washington signing papers, and two photo inside real estate and insurance offices featuring the staff by modern furnishings and equipment. There is also an image of two drivers inside the McGavock Funeral Home's hearse, though I do not classify this as an action shot because the background of the street is whited out around the hearse's edges, so it looks likea vehichle floating in space. The portrait of former tenant farmer Ransom McKay was taken when he was a child, and includes sixteen of his brothers and sisters posed on the steps of a whitewashed building (possibly a church or school) in Tacaula, Georgia. The photograph of Chicago

professionals in the Simms directory made no obvious allusions to the careers of their subjects. By contrast, Micheaux put his filmmaking career front and center—a decision which made practical sense because his notoriety within the black community was much greater than his film revenues. He did not own an oppulent residence or a fur coat to display as markers of success in 1923, but he did have the fame that came from being in the vanguard of African American filmmaking.[2] Moreover, simply appearing in the elite publication suggested that he was a financial success (the cover price of Simms' directory was $2—roughly the cost of an exclusive broadway show, and nineteen times more expensive than the average movie ticket).[3]

Defender publisher Robert Abbott was taken outside—evidenced by the fact that he is wearing a hat.

2 Micheaux's correspondence with the Douglass Theatre manager in Macon, Georgia illustrates how prestige and money did not go hand-in-hand in the independent film business. Micheaux prefered to send business letters on company stationery that listed all his films in circulation, but had to make due when supplies ran short—seemingly a not infrequent occurance for a film company on a tight budget. As he noted in a typed post script to a September 24, 1927 film booking letter to William Smith (which had the company name and address hand-stamped on the top), "P. S. Please excuse stationery as we run out of our regular." Middle Georgia Archives, Charles Henry Douglass business records collection. Box 19, folder 173, item 7.

3 Micheaux's film company photograph resembles five other images in the Simms directory in subtle but important ways: the portrait of the maverick Chicago Defender publisher Robert S. Abbott (the only other man pictured wearing a hat); the photograph of H. A. Watkins standing in his well-appointed real estate and insurance office, with three of his employees seated to his right at their desks (another image in which higher visual position connotes higher professional status); the portrait of Booker T. Washington, in which the late race leader is shown "in his private office," looking up confidently at the camera while signing a stack of papers (one of the handful of "action shots" in the directory); the image of Booker T. Washington's birthplace—a ramshackle cabin with rough-hewn boards and wide, uneven mortar joints (which resembles the western cabin in Micheaux's picture); and the portrait of former tenant farmer Ransom McKay—a photograph taken when he was a child, which includes sixteen of his brothers and sisters posed on the steps of a whitewashed building (possibly a church or school) in Tacaula, Georgia—which was the only other portrait obviously taken outside, and also bespoke its subject's humble origins. Although none of these images are as individually

By the time the Simms directory was published, Micheaux was thirty-nine. He had worked as a shoeshiner, farm hand, factory laborer, coal miner, Pullman porter, and a homesteader before launching his film company in 1918. By January of 1923, he had published three novels and made eight feature films, and would complete two more by the end of the year. He had married (and divorced) a young woman from Chicago's upscale black "East of State" neighborhood, and had battled with and won against influential local ministers who tried to censor his films for their unflattering depictions of members of the clergy. The distinctiveness of Micheaux's visual representation of himself and his film company was no accident. The young artist had a conventional formal portrait taken when he was about thirty years old (and which he had printed in at least one of his novels), but he opted not to use it to publicize the Micheaux Film Corporation:

Figure 3. Oscar Micheaux Formal Portrait, circa 1910.[4]

striking as Micheaux's photograph, read in tandem they reinforce the film company's visual message of black independence, hands-on hard work, and the importance of a rural context.

4 Oscar Micheaux formal portrait. Micheaux reprinted this photograph in his 1913 novel The Conquest; it is also the image on which Gary Kelley based his portrait of the artist for the U.S. Postal Service's 2010 commemorative stamp (number 33 in the Black Heritage series).

He certainly knew the conventions of the urban black elite, had poked fun at them on screen and in print, and chose to represent himself photographically in a different light: as a pioneering black filmmaker and man of action, connected to rural space—particularly to the American West.

Although frequently heralded as cinematic masterpieces by the black press at the time of their debuts,[5] Oscar Micheaux's early films are consistently lambasted by contemporary critics for being sloppy and repetitive. Charlene Regester has done the most comprehensive work on Micheaux's critical reception, and noted that although critics ''have been impressed by Oscar Micheaux's long, productive career... few critics...have respected his works." Regester also identified the critical tendency to classify Micheaux as an "entrepeneur whose first goal [was] to make a profit and then, if popular tastes would allow, to present positive images of African American life."[6] In

---

5 Patrick McGilligan, Oscar Micheaux: The Great and Only (New York: HarperCollins, 2008): 62-4.

6 Charlene Regester, "Oscar Micheaux the Entrepeneur: Financing 'The House Behind the Cedars.'" Journal of Film and Video 49:1-2 (Spring-Summer 1997): 11-27. Also see Regester's "The Misreading and Rereading of African American Filmmaker Oscar Micheaux: A Review of Micheaux Scholarship." Film History 7.4 Auteurism Revisited (Winter, 1995): 426-449. Similar critiques are also frequently offered of his first three novels: Conquest: Story of a Negro Pioneer (1913), The Forged Note (1915), and The Homesteader: A Novel (1915) as is evidenced by the critical introductions in new editions of these works.

point of fact, Micheaux took extraordinary creative risks with his films—risks that did not always yield financial dividends. He frequently chose plots that, on first glance, would be impossible to make conform to film censorship laws of the period, which, in the name of preserving law and order, banned depictions of white racism, and required blacks to hold menial positions. As a result, Micheaux regularly engaged in complicated, protracted, (and, as a result, costly) negotiations with movie censors in order to get his films to market.[7] Some of his films were banned outright, leaving his film company (which typically operated on a shoestring budget) scrambling to make up the lost revenues.

While scholars typically celebrate Micheaux's importance as one of the first—and among the most prolific—early African American filmmakers, many also express great ambivalence at best or dismissiveness at worst about the artistic merits of the work he produced in the 1920s. Micheaux's novels and films are frequently lauded for their cultural and historical significance, and Micheaux himself is often celebrated for his bold treatment of such controversial topics as lynching, economic oppression, and sexual

---

7 A case in point was Micheaux's fall 1925 exchange with the Motion Picture Commission of the State of New York, which rejected his first application for a license for Body and Soul. By November of 1925, the censors' struggles with Micheaux seemed to be old-hat. After a series of letters, on November 11th they asked Micheaux himself to come in to their Seventh Avenue office at 9:30 in the morning to discuss his film. Whatever Micheaux said to the censors must have been persuasive, because the next day they sent him a letter that stated that instead of reviewing his film multiple times (as they had with his films in the past), they would take him at his word that he had made the necessary changes. Before showing the film in-state, the censors requested that Micheaux: "furnish us with a memorandum of all the cut-outs and sub-titles which you made in the film after it was condemned. We need these for our records. If you will make the eliminations ordered in the original and all prints to be exhibited in New York State, using the form of letter required by this office, it will not be necessary to return the same for rescreening." Letter to Micheaux Film Corporation, November 12, 1925. New York State Archives, Series A1418 MPD, Box No. 2587.

violence.[8] But only within the past decade have film critics started to take his work seriously in formal and creative terms, and offered something other than apologetics for his unconventional aesthetic choices: inconsistent shot quality, unconventional narrative sequences, unrealistic settings, stock characters, recycled plots, and re-use of film clips. Micheaux's aesthetic choices were inextricably connected with questions about "what it means to be a human subject and a maker of artifacts,"[9]—that is, with questions about subjectivity and human response to artistic works. New Negro aesthetics was a broad category that encompassed creative types, characters, tropes, forms, and their relationship to the material world; this breadth of concern was in part a result of its participants' desire to effect broad changes in racial perception and action. The view of art as action—"a response to the cultural world and a potential transformation of the culture to which it responds"[10] —was shared by many rural people in the 1920s, despite the prevailing

---

8 Dan Moos noted diametrically opposed critical oversights in the work of historians and film scholars: "Outside the relative abundance of scholarly articles on Micheaux's films, only a smattering of articles celebrate Micheaux's pioneer years on the Great Plains...and offer little analysis of the content of Micheaux's novels in favor of an exposition of the pioneer veracity contained therein. In fact, these articles on Micheaux-the-pioneer generally do not discuss his films, except to point out that Micheaux left his homesteading days to become America's premier black film maker of the twentieth century. These articles often form a type of photographic negative to the film scholarship on Micheaux, in that film scholars tend to write little concerning Micheaux's South Dakota years, except to note that he tried farming before moving into film production....Within literary study...Micheaux has also had a cold, or possiby indifferent, reception, excepting Joseph Young's highly critical book Black Novelist as White Racist, the only comprehensive study of any length on Micheaux's novels." Dan Moos, "Reclaiming the Frontier: Oscar Micheaux as Black Turnerian." African American Review 36. 3 (Autumn, 2002): 359-60.

9 Alan Singer and Allen Dunn, eds. Literary Aesthetics: A Reader (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000): 12.

10 Singer and Dunn, 10. Singer and Dunn note that this view of aesthetics was shared by Ludwig Wittgenstein, John Dewey, Kenneth Burke, and Charles Altieri. Altieri links Wittgenstein's close connection between ethics and aesthetics with the definition of texts as social forces—acts "of intelligence working with emotional intensity." Charles

assumption that they were too busy trying to survive to value things that were not obviously utilitarian. Micheaux knew that precisely because people were rural, they craved certain kinds of aesthetic experience, and he wrote about this powerful rural desire for specific kinds of objects on which to affix aesthetic attention. His otherwise frugal protagonist, Martin Eden, buys a large box of novels and magazines on a trip to Chicago in The Wind from Nowhere—much to the delight of his rural neighbors, the Stewarts.[11] In The Homesteader, when the farmer Jean Baptiste seeks a publisher for his fiction, the entire community awaits news of the results:

> [H]e was questioned daily as to when and where it would appear. He was mentioned in the local newspapers, and much speculation was the issue. Many inquired if he had featured them in a story, and were cheered if he said that he had, while others showed their disappointment when advised that they had not been mentioned. But with one and all, there was shown him deep appreciation of his literary effort.[12]

It is possible that Micheaux's own turn to fiction writing in South Dakota was influenced by his rural community's yearning and high regard for literary art.

Micheaux is also often linked to the expanding urban movie-going culture that Jacqueline Stewart documented in Migrating to the Movies.[13] Viewing him as a businessman rather than an artist, scholars have tended to dismiss his frequent depictions

---

Altieri, Canons and Consequences: Reflections on the Ethical Force of Imaginative Ideals (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1990): 15.

11 Deborah Stewart is the only one home when the package is delivered by the rural mail carrier. Suspecting that it contains books, she opens it—despite the fact that it is addressed to her father. Oscar Micheaux, The Wind from Nowhere (New York: Book Supply Company, 1941): 54-5.

12 Oscar Micheaux, The Homesteader. Reprint of the 1917 edition. (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1994): 404.

13 The earliest scholarly article to identify Micheaux primarily with urban viewers appears to be Daniel J. Leab's "'All-Colored'—But Not Much Different: Films Made for Negro Ghetto Audiences, 1913-1928." Phylon 36. 3 (3rd Qtr., 1975): 321-339.

of rural life as simple acts of autobiographical mythmaking—commercially-driven self-promotion for urban film-goers, rather than indicative of a complex and sustained creative interest in, and relationship with, rural issues and audiences. But in his books and films, Micheaux did draw extensively from his own life experiences, particularly the eight years he spent farming in South Dakota.[14] He made and marketed films about rural concerns, such as defending the rights of black landowners and the establishment of rural schools. He distributed his films in the American South, where they played to audiences in big cities such as Atlanta and Macon, but also in smaller cities surrounded by farm land, such as Fort Valley (population 3,223) and Sandersville (population 2,695) in Georgia—with economies that relied on farmers from the outlying areas who came to town regularly to do business, shop, and socialize. Micheaux also published articles in the black press urging African Americans to migrate to and homestead in the rural West. In 1913, he dedicated his first novel to Booker T. Washington, the principal of Tuskegee (the nation's leading black agricultural and industrial college), and routinely included images of Washington in his films—often making the portrait of the race leader a prized possession of his heroes and heroines.

Deeply committed to representing the full range of African American social types, Micheaux depicted a range of rural New Negroes on the big screen, and leveraged and expanded upon popular photographic images of modern black rural people from schools such as Hampton and Tuskegee. Micheaux's early films provided a moving counternarrative to the degrading film images of African Americans routinely offered to both white and black movie patrons. The racist attitudes that he was working against are

14 Micheaux's three novels about homesteading in South Dakota, written over a span of 28 years, reflect his sustained interest in rural life and themes: Conquest: Story of a Negro Pioneer (1913), The Homesteader: A Novel (1915), and The Wind from Nowhere (1941).

typified by a 1918 ad placed by the white-owned Ebony Film Corporation (which regularly offended black moviegoers with "comic" scenes of blacks stealing chickens, or being arrested by the police) in a trade publication for booking agents and theater owners:

> Colored people are funny. If colored people weren't funny, there would be no plantation melodies, no banjoes, no cake walk, no buck and wing dance, no minstrel show and no black-face vaudeville. And they are funny in the studio.[15]

Micheaux did much more than counter the typical, homespun images of black agricultural workers—and the more virulently racist images circulated by D. W. Griffith and other mainstream filmmakers. My contention is that Micheaux's films aesthetically reflected the practices of recycling and reuse that became markers of black rural modernity in the World War I era, when American farmers demonstrated their patriotism and global consciousness by refraining from consumerism, and instead devoted their energies to the production and export of food and raw materials to support the war effort and post-war European recovery.

One of the most significant challenges confronting scholars who work on Micheaux is the paucity of primary source material. In particular, generalizations about Micheaux's early work are difficult to make given that only three of the nineteen films he circulated in the 1920s are extant.[16] As Patrick McGilligan noted, financial constraints

---

15 Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence, Writing Himself Into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2000): 92.

16 Both The Homesteader (1918, Micheaux's first feature film) and Within Our Gates (1919) were still in circulation several years later—as evidenced by the few extant theater booking records, the facts that the Micheaux Film Company letterhead often listed previous films (in order of their release) to let theater managers know which older films were still available for rent, and by the dates that Micheaux submitted his films for censor review in various states. For example, the Motion Picture Commission of the State of New York formally approved a version of The Homesteader on September 30, 1922—after requiring several major edits and charging Micheaux a licensing fee of $21 ($3 for each 1,000 feet of film). New York State Archives, Series A1418 MPD. The 1921 censorship law meant that all Micheaux's films (even those already in circulation) needed

meant that Micheaux produced only a handful of prints of each of his early films (for example, four copies of The Homesteader, compared to the 35-65 prints made of most Hollywood studio films during this time). Micheaux's copies "were worn and nicked by the time they arrived in smaller theaters months after their release, with footage missing and the remaining reels showing considerable wear and tear."[17] The missing footage was not always accidental; varying state and local censorship laws also meant that Micheaux's films were frequently re-edited while they were in circulation. Viewers in Chicago often saw a different version of Micheaux's films than did moviegoers in New York, Charlotte, or Stockholm, and period film reviews reflect these disparities. Working without master copies or director's cuts (and often without any film copies at all),

---

to be officially vetted before they could be publicly shown. Because New York's censorship standards were so strict, many other states formally recognized their licensing—although each locality could, at their own discretion, ban films and demand additional edits. Both The Homesteader and Within Our Gates circulated for several years, playing in ever-smaller venues in little cities and towns. A copy of the latter film was located in Spain and subsequently restored. There are no known prints of The Homesteader. As Bowser and Spence have noted, "[c]ompiling a filmography of Oscar Micheaux's silent films is not as easy as it might seem. Micheaux's penchant for publicity and fierce optimism often led him to announce films, casting, and deals that may never have come about. Sometimes he would change a film's title in mid-production. In the later years, the lack of coverage in the press, indeed, the lack of newspaper advertising for "Colored" theaters, sometimes makes it difficult to confirm that a film was actually released." Bowser and Spence, 271. The films Micheaux circulated in the 1920s (and the date each film was made) are: The Homesteader (1918), Within Our Gates (1919), Symbol of the Unconquered (1920), The Brute (1920), The Gunsaulus Mystery (1921), The Dungeon (1922), The Virgin of the Seminole (1922), Deceit (1923), Jasper Landry's Will (1923), Body and Soul (1924), Birthright (1924), Veiled Aristocrats (1924), Son of Satan (1925), The Conjure Woman (1925), The Spider's Web (1926), The House Behind the Cedars (1927), The Millionaire (1927), When Men Betray (1928), Thirty Years Later (1928), and Wages of Sin (1928). Micheaux later remade Birthright and Veiled Aristocrats as talkies.

17 McGilligan, 136.

scholars have turned to a myriad of other sources, such as business records and film publicity materials, to make sense of Micheaux's body of work.[18]

One result of this critical focus on film publicity materials is the erasure of rural themes, which were often overshadowed by more sensational advertising subjects. Because of this erasure, many of Micheaux's film techniques and formal choices have seemed sloppy or anachronistic to critics, who compared his films to those made by mainstream filmmakers focused only on urban audiences and concerns. My contention is that formal investigations of Micheaux's filmmaking techniques can be usefully buttressed by American Studies approaches to material culture; I argue that an expanded range of cultural, historical, and biographical documents are relevant in assessing Micheaux's unique creative choices and aims, and I present these in this chapter. What I restore to the discussion is the space for creative agency that many accounts of Micheaux strip with their singleminded focus on factors constraining the artist's aesthetic choices: racist censorship laws, segregated distribution channels and theaters, and the very real exploitation that caused African American audiences to have less money and leisure than their white counterparts. Rather than viewing his film aesthetics as an accident of the material and social conditions of their production, I propose that Micheaux's creative choices were conscious, masterful, and contingent—and predicated on modern rural standards, practices, and understandings of social problems.

---

18 Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence noted the importance of "Micheaux's novels and other published writing, business correspondence, promotional materials and coverage in the press, censorship records, people's memories, other writing of the period" for scholars confronted with the lack of "preferred evidence:" his films. Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence, Writing Himself Into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences (New Brunswixck: Rutgers UP, 2000): xviii.

REUSE AS A RURAL AESTHETIC

One of the most common criticisms of Micheaux's cinematic work is its reuse of film footage, plots, and characters from his earlier films and novels. Starting in the early 1980s, critics began to read Micheaux's choices as part of a deliberately anti-Hollywood aesthetic (rather than as indicators of artistic amateurism).[19] Building on the logic of rural modernity, self-sufficiency, and re-use of materials popularized during World War I, my suggestion is that Micheaux's recycling of material is both anti-Hollywood and rural-centric; Micheaux's creative recycling was a rural-inflected form of modern creative production. Micheaux wrote critically about consumerism in his 1910 Chicago Defender article "Where the Negro Fails":

> I return from Chicago...more discouraged each year with the hopelessness of his [the young Negro's] foresight. His inability to use common sense is discouraging....The Negro leads in the consumption of produce, and especially of meat, and then his fine clothes—he hasn't the least thought of where the wool grew that he wears.

Just as Langston Hughes drew readers' attention to the hand-embroidered collar in his 1923 poem "The Little Frightened Child," and Jean Toomer made the silk stockings and

---

19 In 1991, bell hooks argued that the complexity and diversity of Micheaux's film images resisted Hollywood cinema's white supremacism because Micheaux "refused to accept the notion that black cultural production should simply be a response to white representations of blackness and, thereby, only portray blackness in a positive light." bell hooks, "Micheaux: Celebrating Blackness." Black American Literature Forum 25.2 (Summer 1991): 354. Reprinted in Black Looks: Race and Representation (Boston: South End Press, 1992). J. Ronald Green was the first to argue that Micheaux's combination of high stylistic values and low production values was "in fact, a non-assimilative style that glosses a living struggle with an implicit 'twoness', the double-consciousness of the African American experience," and that Micheaux himself regarded Hollywood cinema as "a dangerous attraction." J. Ronald Green, "The Micheaux Style." Black Film Review Vol. 7, No. 4 (1992): 32-34. A decade before hooks or Green articulated their positions in print, James Hoberman speculatively suggested that Micheaux's "bad" filmmaking technique, if done deliberately, was a mark of genius. James Hoberman, "Bad Movies." Film Comment Vol. 16, No. 4 (July-August 1980): 12.

purple dress given to Louisa by her white lover the topic of community gossip in "Blood-Burning Moon," Micheaux also invested clothing with social meaning in this newspaper article by focusing on urban conspicuous consumption of clothing as well as foodstuffs. Micheaux was doing more here than simply criticizing expensive garments in Chicago in 1910; by castigating New Negro dandies for what he viewed as irresponsible consumer choices, he was offering a pointed critique of urban consumer culture. Monica L. Miller notes that dandyism—carefully considered, self-conscious, fashionable, and often flamboyant dress—was an important urban New Negro strategy of self-definition, though she also conceded that it had:

> a difficult, indeed, a tortured, relationship to consumption in that the procurement of clothing, accessories, and luxury goods that enables the performance comes literally and sometimes metaphorically at a high cost.[20]

Rather than a studious focus on popular fashion, Micheaux suggested that African American attention would be better focused on the costs of various types of consumption, the places that provide the raw materials for sought-after consumer goods, and the myriad opportunities this offered for thrift and productive labor. Micheaux cited the relationship between rural sheep ranches and urban luxury clothing in the Chicago Defender; like many other rural people, was acutely aware of how urban wealth and belongings were often derived from rural industry.[21] Accordingly, his vision of modern black life was not

---

20 Monica L. Miller, Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity (Durham: Duke UP, 2009): 17.

21 Booker T. Washington has a number of similar scenes in his autobiography, Up From Slavery. In one example in chapter eight, "Teaching School in a Stable and a Hen-House," Washington reflected on the white people who were concerned about opening Tuskegee because they believed it would result in a loss of black rural productive capacity: "[t]hese people feared the result of education would be that the Negroes would leave the farms, and that it would be difficult to secure them for domestic service. The white people who questioned the wisdom of starting this new school had in their minds pictures of what was called an educated Negro, with a high hat, imitation

one of conspicuous urban consumption, but rather of conspicuous rural production. All African Americans, according to Micheaux, should think about where the food they eat and the clothing they wear comes from, and, if possible, have a hand in producing them. Micheaux proposed a modern rural alternative to the finery type that has so dominated the scholarly imagination. What I offer in this chapter is a re-animated perspective on the dandy as one of a myriad of modern black aesthetic types, rather than the epitome of New Negro style. The result of such a line of thinking is the ability to see the modest, utilitarian clothing worn by so many rural African Americans in the 1920s as equally capable of representing "modernity, freedom, oppositionality, and power," and Micheaux's championing of such an aesthetics in his films as a proactive rather than a reactive move.[22] As Peggy Phelan argues, conspicuousness and visibility do not themselves confer power and identity, but are matrices through which power and identity are negotiated.[23] Micheaux used plain, modest, inconspicuous rural dress as a matrix through which rural New Negro identity could come to the fore on the big screen.

Micheaux's position in 1910 anticipated the widespread awareness of the complementary nature of urban and rural production catalyzed by World War I and its massive demands for both raw materials and industrial labor. On one side of the coin, the war effort accelerated African American urban migration by creating new job opportunities in cities, and familiarizing black soldiers with urban cultures overseas. On

---

gold eye-glasses, a showy walking stick, kid gloves, fancy boots, and what not—in a word, a men who was determined to live by his wits" rather than through productive rural labor in farming or the skilled trades. Booker T. Washington, Up From Slavery, reprinted in Three Negro Classics (New York: Avon Books, 1965): 92.

22 Richard Powell, "Sartor Africanus." Dandies: Fashion and Finesse in Art and Culture, ed. Susan Fillen-Yeah (New York: New York U P, 2001): 224.

23 Peggy Phelan, Unmarked: The Politics of Performance (New York: Routledge, 1993): 97.

the other side of the coin, the massive expansion of agricultural production occasioned by the war led to increased opportunities for farmers.[24] Largely because of the war effort, the percentage of improved acreage in the United States increased by an average of 300 percent between 1910 and 1925 (Arizona, New Mexico, and Wyoming experienced increases of over 1,000 percent). As Lee Alston noted,

> [t]he rapid escalation of cash crop prices during and immediately after World War I encouraged the planting of cash crops on land that was formerly cut-over timberland or used for grazing or self-sufficient agriculture. The overall increase in inproved acreage during this period was dramatic. In only three states did [improved] acreage decline.[25]

Some sectors of the farm economy remained relatively strong through the war and into the 1920s (notably dairy products, fruit, and poultry), but most saw wild fluctuations in prices.[26] Yet despite this crop price instability, agricultural land values soared in many parts of the country, as did land speculation[27]—all topics of personal interest to Micheaux

---

24 In addition to seeing increased black rural outmigration, the post-war 1920s also saw the apex of black farm ownership (with over 900,000 African American farmers tending 16 million acres of land). John Francis Ficara and Juan Williams, Black Farmers in America (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2006): xxi.

25 Alston, Lee J. "Farm Foreclosures in the United States During the Interwar Period." Journal of Economic History 43. 4 (Dec, 1983): 893.

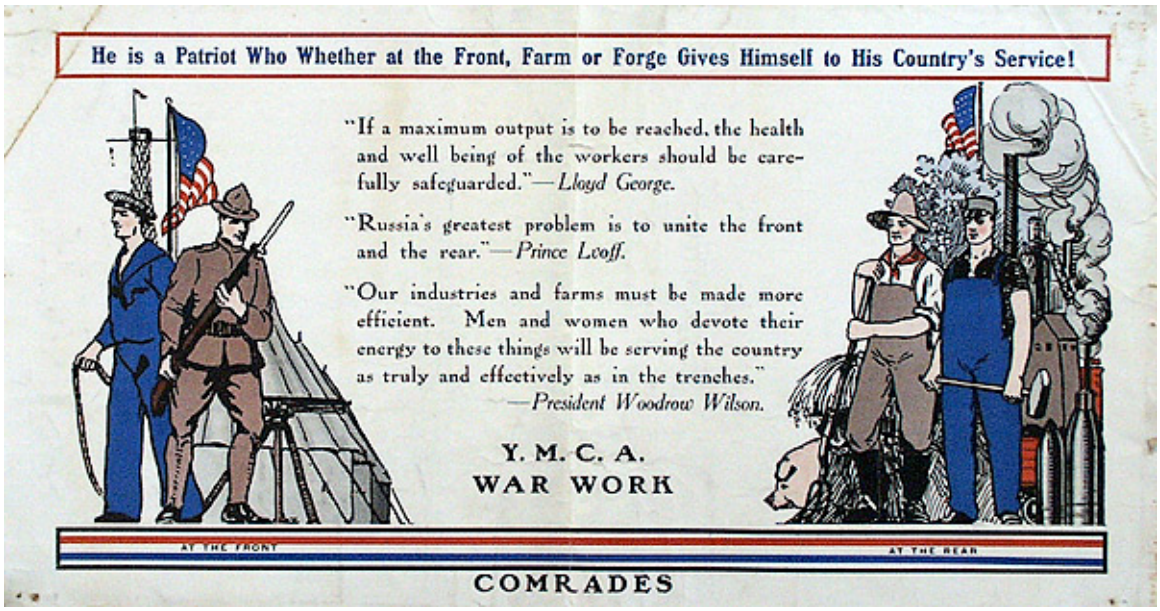
26 Alston, 890-893.

27 Contemporary agricultural economist A. B. Genung aptly summarized the situation: "From the late nineties down to 1913, the period had been one of slowly rising prices. That was a chapter of agricultural stabilization, of gradually improved production, of increasing property values, of moderate prosperity. During this time agricultural products exchanged for industrial products and services on a plane of comparative stability and slowly increasing advantage. With the advent of the war in 1914, a new chapter opened. The first shock of war merely set the price structure into violent fluctuation: wheat prices, for example, abruptly went up while cotton just as abruptly went down. By 1916, however, the situation had crystalized and prices had really begun to mount. This continued for four years the feverish experiences of wartime: an unending pressure for greater production, soaring price level, expansion, finally inflation and widespread speculation." A. B. Genung, New York State College of Agriculture, Cornell University. "The Purchasing Power of the Farm Dollar from 1913 to the Present." The

because of his years as a farmer in a developing agricultural region, and his continuing faith in rural uplift for industrious African Americans.

American war propoganda regularly recognized and celebrated urban and rural life as different and complementary modes of modern patriotic citizenship:

Figure 4. "Comrades."



As the United War Work Campaign poster (above) declared enthusiastically in its topmost headline, "He is a Patriot Who Whether at the Front, Farm or Forge Gives Himself to His Country's Service!"[28] Rural work and soldiering were regularly analogized in all types and styles of war art, an example of this being commercial artist Adolph Treidler's juxtaposition of the silhouette of a farmer guiding a plow over a

---

ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 117.1 (January 1925): 22.

28 "Comrades." 21" x 11". United War Work Campaign, World War I Poster Collection. Special Collections, Tutt Library, Colorado College, Colorado Springs, Colorado. Accessed 1/17/2011. <http://www.coloradocollege.edu/library/specialcollections/historicalcollections/wwi/UWWC141.html>

background with soldiers fighting on a smoke-filled foreign battlefield in his poster "Farm to Win 'Over There,'"—which drew on the controversial modern German painting style, with its simplified forms and color palate:[29]

Figure 5. "Farm to Win 'Over There.'"

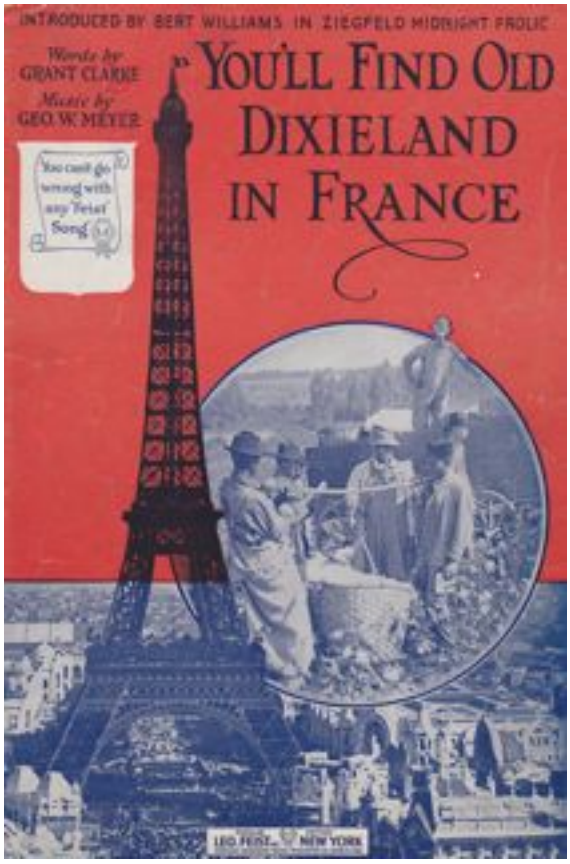
29 At the turn of the century, experimental German artists had pioneered a new poster style dubbed "Plakatstil," which was radically different from the then-popular Art Nouveau approach. Plakatstil used a limited number of strong colors (often in unusual combinations); bold, clear typefaces; and simplified shapes and objects. During World War I, many German and German-influenced poster artists in the United States (Treidler among them) combined this modern approach with more realistic depictions of human forms and objects. But even a toned-down version of Plakatstil was still easily recognizable to viewers, and a number of patriotic art critics suddenly termed these German painting influences as subversive, and sometimes successfully fought to have the works banned from exhibitions. Adolph Treidler, "Farm to Win 'Over There." Milton W. Brown, American Painting from the Armory Show to the Depression (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1970): 73-6. Treidler also analogized women's war work and soldiering in his 1918 United War Work Campaign poster "For Every Fighter a Woman Worker," which depicted a woman in army-green factory overalls and a cap, holding up a fighter plane in her left hand and a bomb in her right. New York: Scottish Rite Masonic Museum and Library, A2003/030/8.

Even commercial concerns such as the Leo Feist music publishing company cashed in on the popular link between black farming and soldiering, with musical hits such as "You'll Find Old Dixieland in France," which included the following lyrics (also translated into French in the sheet music score):

> Don't forget "Old Shim-me Sam,"
> Famous boy from Alabam',
> He marched away in khaki pants,
> Instead of picking melons off the vine,
> They're picking Germans off the Rhine,
> You'll find old Dixieland in France.[30]

30 Grant Clark and George W. Meyer, "You'll Find Old Dixieland in France," sheet music (New York: Leo. Feist Inc., 1918). Collection of the author.

Figure 6. Sheet Music Cover: "You'll Find Old Dixieland in France."



Just as the 1918 song noted in the Introduction, "How're You Gonna Keep 'Em (Down on the Farm)," presented Paris as a threat to the retention of African American farm workers, "You'll Find Old Dixieland in France" sought to reassure listeners that Paris was transformed by rural African American troops, rather than the reverse. In the logic of the song, foreign soldiering was a simple substitution for southern agricultural work; picking mellons was analogous to shooting German soldiers. As these song lyrics indicate, France was more than just a foreign place. As Brent Hayes Edwards has argued, to African Americans in the early decades of the twentieth century, France (and Paris in particular) was often a used as a symbolic shorthand for black internationalism, and for

cosmopolitanism itself.[31] Micheaux gave several of his fictional rural protagonists French surnames and pseudonyms, like his own. In the first pages of The Conquest, the narrator Oscar Devereaux established both a connection to and generational and geographical distance from French influence:

> It is a peculiar name that ends with an "eaux," however, and is considered an odd name for a colored man to have, unless he is from Louisiana where the French crossed with the Indians and slaves, causing many Louisiana negroes to have French names and many speak the French language also. My father, however, came from Kentucky and inherited the name from his father who was sold off into Texas during the slavery period and is said to be living there today.[32]

France clearly required rhetorical containment in song lyrics and in fiction to mitigate the potential threat it posed to American rural life and identity, even as it symbolically enabled new kinds of modern rural internationalism.

The dimensions of a new modern rural citizenship were clearly articulated by a government program called the "United States School Garden Army," which linked farming, patriotism, and international involvement. The motto of the program was "A garden for every child. Every child in a garden." A forerunner of the well-known Victory Garden movement of World War II, the "Liberty Gardens" grown by children during and immediately after World War I were conceived both as a way for urban, suburban and rural children to learn rural values through manual labor and directed agricultural study, and for farm families to contribute to the war effort by becoming entirely self-sufficient—thus lessening the strain on transportation infrastructure and enabling more

---

31 Brent Hayes Edwards, The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003): 4-5.

32 Oscar Micheaux, The Conquest (New York: Washington Square Press, 2003): 2.

crops and materials to be shipped to troops and starving civilians abroad. As Rose Hayden-Smith noted, the School Garden Army:

> represented an unprecedented governmental effort to make agricultural education a formal part of the public school curriculum throughout the United States. While agricultural education for rural youth had been a government goal for several years....[t]he USSGA represented a shift in federal policy by strongly targetting urban and suburban youth.[33]

The basic Liberty Garden conceived by the School Garden Army program was 650 square feet, and contained both winter and summer crops that would produce approximately 1,340 servings of vegetables annually (the ideal garden, tended by an older child, would be larger and produce enough food to feed a family of four). To help students identify with American soldiers in particular and the war effort in general, students "enlisted" and were given military ranks (private, first lieutenant, second lieutenant, captain) by their teachers; teachers could reward students with insignia bars, which the U. S. Food Administration provided free of charge.

An appeal to patriotism was a good way to promote a vocational agricultural program in urban and suburban settings because it emphasized the morally uplifting nature of the work. As Viviana Zelizer noted, in the 1920s, the social value of American children was in flux; the focus on children's economic contributions to their families through wage labor shifted, and many families started valuing childhood employment primarily for its instructive potential. In this new context, jobs were supposed to offer children opportunities to learn: about responsibility, money management, and, in the School Garden Army's case, modern citizenship.[34] In rural areas, by contrast, the

---

33 Rose Hayden-Smith, 4-H Center for Youth Development Monograph, University of California (Winter 2006): 2.

34 Viviana A. Zelizer, Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994): 73-112.

economic contributions of children were still highly valued, so patriotism was an additional motivation that might help justify the reallocation of a child's very valuable work time.[35] Geraldine Davidson recalled the day in 1927 when her mother realized that she was physically able to chop cotton. The seven-year-old, whose job it was to babysit her younger siblings and bring water to workers in the fields, made the mistake of using her snake-killing hoe too efficiently in front of the adults:

> I took the little hoe and I started chopping, and she stood back and she looked. She said, "oh, you can't stay in the house anymore. You're going to come to the field." I said, "Well, what's going to happen to my brothers?" She said, "They're going to have to look after themselves."[36]

Davidson's childhood contributions as an agricultural worker were substantial. As an eight-year-old, she was able to pick 204 pounds of cotton a day; at age seventeen, she picked about 370 pounds.[37] Her experience of balancing schooling and extensive childhood work was also not unusual. Stewart Tolnay noted that, in 1910, nearly eighty percent of southern black farm children aged fifteen to eighteen reported an occupation on the census (by 1940, that number would shrink to 43%), and more than half of them were still enrolled in school at least part-time.[38] The economic benefits of truck gardening were not lost on Micheaux, whose protagonist, Oscar Devereaux, first worked

---

35 Stewart Tolnay noted that the rural South's reliance on child labor persisted into the 1940s: "Partially as a result of that reliance, southern states were relatively tardy in passing legislation to restrict child labor. When such legislation was adopted, it routinely exempted agricultural work because of the important contributions of children in rural areas." Stewart E. Tolnay, The Bottom Rung: African American Family Life on Southern Farms (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1999): 41.

36 Jennifer Ritterhouse, Growing Up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2006): 184.

37 Riterhouse, 185.

38 Tolnay, 44.

(albeit rather ineptly) in his family's fields as a child—until he proved to be more valuable as a marketer of the family's foodstuffs in the nearby town:

> The townspeople who came to buy, women mostly with baskets, would file leisurely between the rows of vehicles, hacks and spring wagons of various descriptions, looking here and there at the vegetables displayed....my father complained of my poor service in the field and in disgust I was sent off to do the marketing—which pleased me....I was not given much credit for my ability to sell, however, until my brother, who complained that I was given all the easy work...was sent to do the marketing. He was not a salesman and...plainly showed it.[39]

Devereaux noted that offering flattery and personal attention to each customer resulted in increased sales, and meant that "our truck gardening, the small herd of milkers and the chickens, paid as well as the farm itself."[40] For rural parents evaluating the School Garden Army program, the economic value of the food produced was certainly a factor in the decision to allow their children to particpate. But so too was patriotic service, which offered the potential to morally uplift African American children, and, by virtue of their upstanding citizenship, gave greater credibility to their claims to civil and economic rights.

During the war, small farm publications as well as major urban newspapers such as the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times ran numerous lauditory stories about the School Garden Army, and multi-millionare businessman and philanthropist Charles Lathrop Pack authored a book entitled The War Garden Victorious: Its Wartime Need

---

39 Micheaux, The Conquest, 5-6.

40 Micheaux, The Conquest, 6. Micheaux's own real-life farming experiences were comparatively privileged, as both he and most of his family members were land land owners rather than sharecroppers or tenants like the majority of African American farm workers during this period. Although the work was equally physically demanding, hard times meant bankrupcy or foreclosure for the Micheauxs rather than starvation.

and Its Economic Value in Peace.[41] In 1919, the head of the sponsoring agency (future president Herbert Hoover) explained to program participants that their democratic responsibility was now to fight famine: "[e]ven though the armistice was signed, there are still many American troops overseas, and the millions of hungry children...looking to us for the food to keep them alive." The challenge was for the children to remain an "Army of food-producing workers, loyally responding to the needs of the world" by being self-sufficient (and thus helping their families to forego both consumer goods and foodstuffs). Whether urban or rural, School Garden Army participants were reassured that the nation's farmers could export more crops and raw materials as a result of their labor and frugality.[42]

---

41 Charles Lathrop Pack, The War Garden Victorious: Its Wartime Need and Its Economic Value in Peace (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1919). Mainstream newspaper articles on the program include: "Food Work Praised. Garden Movement Here Sets Nation an Example," Los Angeles Times (29 July 1917): V-12; "Children Line Up to Defeat the Huns," Los Angeles Times (27 May 1918): I-2; "Destroys War Garden, and Is Ordered Interned," Los Angeles Times (20 May 1918): I-7; and "Enlist in School Farm Army. Government Tells of Big Results from the Work of Country's Boys and Girls. 60,000 Acres Are Tilled," New York Times (20 Oct. 1918): 85.

42 School Garden Army general brochure. Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office (1919): 2. Similar modern self-sufficiency programs that focused on rural people also taught food preservation, clothing recycling, and the manufacture and repair of household goods and furnishings, and were ubiquitous during the war years and after. Marilyn Holt described a related agricultural program for women, as well as the overall effect such initiatives had on women's farm work: "[w]ar also brought more women, however temporarily, into agriculture. With the creation of the Women's Land Army, girls and women from cities, towns, and rural areas were mobilized by private organizations, the USDA's emergency extension program, and the National Council on Defense for the purpose of raising food. These women brought in crops and harvested truck gardens and orchards....As they brought in needed crops and participated in the war effort through club work, women learned lasting lessons in organization....Traditionally, women's groups raised money for local improvements through bazaars, entertainments, and auctions of homemade items....These activites did not end with the organizations and ideas that emerged from World War I, but there was a subtle change in thinking about women's labor, with greater emphasis on channeling earning potential to achieve

The extreme poverty and heavy workload of most rural African Americans during this time period makes their participation in voluntary conservation and farm improvement programs such as the School Garden Army seem extraordinary—particularly since, unlike Micheaux, most did not own their own land. Most black farmers had few material possessions, subsisted most of the year on a meager diet of "meat, meal and molasses," worked long hours in the fields, and lived in crude one- or two-room houses without glass windows, running water, or insulation. And yet African Americans participated in these rural modernization programs in significant numbers. For example, in 1916, after the first year of "Negro Extension Work" in Texas, the four-member extension work team based at Prairie View A&M reported "144 clubs organized with 6,013 members, 97 lectures attended by 21,985 people, 89 field demonstrations attended by 3,121 people, 860 winter-garden demonstrations, and 135 poultry demonstrations."[43] Extension programming and staff expanded markedly across the nations after America entered World War I, and over the next three decades. Some post-war modernization programs geared toward rural whites also noted black participation—sometimes much to their organizers' surprise. Marilyn Holt examined a number of magazine articles, advertisements, contests, and home extension projects that focused on farmhouse renovation, a rural reform trend that started in about 1920. Holt noted that the push to

---

personal gain. USDA and college extension programs considered money-making projects and home industries that allowed women in groups or as individuals to increase their incomes." Marilyn Irvin Holt, Linoleum, Better Babies & The Modern Farm Woman, 1890-1930 (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1995): 75-76.

43 The Texas State Historical Association, "Black Extension Service." Handbook of Texas Online. Accessed 2/11/11. <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/pkb04>

modernize farm homes was widespread, and occurred across many ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic and geographic segments of America's rural population.[44]

The federal government and land grant universities were far from the only groups promoting rural conservation and production programs during this era; black agricultural and industrial schools were in the forefront of the movement. For example, before and during World War I, George Washington Carver led a campaign for sustainable agriculture among poor black southern farmers. He and the other faculty at Tuskegee's agricultural experiment station rode out into the countryside in wagons (and later, in Model Ts and trucks) to conduct agricultural demonstrations for local farmers, teaching such things as how to replace expensive commercial fertilizers with homemade versions made from swamp muck, and how to recognize and destroy destructive insects. Carver's emphasis was on rural production, but not necessarily for urban or overseas markets:

> [R]ather than convincing black farmers that they should become efficient agriculturalists in an increasingly interdependent industrial age, Carver sought to persuade them to become more economically independent, to decrease their reliance on mass-manufactured goods, and to use their fields to provide for their own tables rather than fibers for the nation's textile mills.[45]

Carver personally accepted numerous speaking engagements at rural churches and agricultural fairs throughout the South—where he talked with landowners and tenants alike about sustainable farming techniques, analyed local soil and plant specimens

---

44 For example, in Texas in the 1920s, home demonstration agents held county, district, and state-level "improved kitchen" contests to promote the modernization of rural households. There were two categories: one for improvements costing less than $25, and a second for projects exceeding that budget. The contests were incredibly popular, as evinced by the significant participation of African-American and white tenant wives who worked to modernize even though they did not own their homes and would probably relocate and leave some of their contest work behind within two years. Holt, 88-91.

45 Mark Hersey, "Hints and Suggestions to Farmers: George Washington Carver and Rural Conservation in the South," Environmental History 11 (April, 2006): 251.

brought to him, and fielded numerous questions from his audiences. He and the rest of the faculty also wrote and circulated numerous pamphlets in straightforward, non-technical language that instructed black farmers on how to improve their situation through conservation and use of the natural resources they had at their disposal.[46] Because of his friendship with James Wilson (his former professor from Iowa State University, who served as the Secretary of Agriculture from 1897-1913), Carver was also able procure and distribute seeds from the USDA to Georgia farmers who attended the annual Farmers Conference on the Tuskegee campus.

Figure 7. Negro Home Demonstration Class in Rug Making[47]

46 Some examples of Tuskegee farmers publications include "How to Build Up Worn Out Soils," "Saving the Wild Plum Crop," and "When, What and How to Can and Preserve Fruits and Vegetables in the Home." Hersey, 244-8, 250.

47 "U.S. Department of Agriculture Miscellaneous Circular No. 72: A Decade of Negro Extension Work, 1914-1924," (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1926): 26. The caption under this photograph reads "Negro home demonstration agent demonstrating the making of rugs for the home. During 1924, 7,688 women and 8,656 girls were enrolled to make or buy and install certain house furnishings suggested by the agents." Often, these rugs were made with dyed gunny sacks.

Thanks to World War I, agricultural production and non-consumerism became alternative markers of American modernity, and hallmarks of the rural world-minded citizen. Rural modernity, like urban modernity, was certainly associated with consumer goods such as automobiles, linoleum, and washing machines, and with technological advances such as electricity.[48] But with many of those things far out of reach for economic and logistical reasons, rural people turned instead to scientific principles of cleanliness and disease prevention, and industrial productivity gauges such as time and motion studies. Rural reformers used consumer goods as pedagogical tools—to rethink the organization and nature of farm work and household organization.[49] In this reform

---

48 Ronald Kline, an historian whose scholarship focuses on technology and social change in rural America, noted that:"[b]y 1920…the nation's farm families (32 million people living on 6.5 million farms) faced an extensive mediating network of public and private agencies committed to the goal of industrializing agriculture and urbanizing rural life. Farm men, women, and youth encountered these agencies in the country as well as in town, read their exhortations in newspapers and farm journals, listened to their messages on the radio or at meeting of the Grange and local farm bureaus." Kline, and many other scholars who drew on his work, argued that rural people contested, adopted and modified "urban" technologies (automobiles, telephones, radios and electricity) to fit their unique circumstances and aspirations. "Middle-class farm men and women may have dressed more like city folk when they went to town to buy a car in the 1920s or attend an REA meeting about getting electricity" Kline noted, "but they did so in order to build a better rural life, not the urban or suburban one promoted by modernizers." Ronald R. Kline, Consumers in the Country: Technology and Social Change in Rural America (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2002): 15-16, 19. Kline's work on rural resistance to, and modifications of, new technologies is thoughtful and impressive. But what Kline failed to do was back up the claim that the technologies he studied were viewed as "urban" by rural residents (modernization, industrialization, and urbanization are all presented as one and the same). As a result, he (and many of the scholars who cite him) have missed the fact that the story of the 1920s is not simply one of urban initiatives and technologies imposed on an unwilling rural population. Rural people designed and implemented their own modernization programs, as well as negotiated those initiatives spearheaded by urban reformers.

49 A typical illustration of this is a caption from a U. S. Department of Agriculture pamphlet on negro extension work; the text underneath Figure 6 (a photograph of four African American women using modern laundry equipment on the

context, consumer goods served as generative devices to help farm residents imagine an America where the access gaps between urban and rural people (and also blacks and whites) did not exist, and thus motivate them to start making that egalitarian vision a reality.[50] The rural uplift initiatives that touched the broadest cross-section of people during this decade were the Country Life Commission (and the resulting country life movement), the Smith-Lever Extension Act (and the resulting rural production and conservation programs), and the expansion of the U.S. Postal Service's Rural Free Delivery program.

This is the cultural context that Micheaux's photograph (posed with camera, megaphone, and film crew in front of the rough-hewn South Dakota cabin) in the 1923 Simms business directory was meant to evoke; it was an image not of conspicuous consumption, but of conspicuous production (in this case, of "high class Negro feature photoplays" rather than the high quality foodstuffs or handicrafts so often pictured next to human subjects in images of rural uplift). Micheaux used still photography to signal his connection to rural life and values—a creative commitment that was amply reflected in the recurrance of rural themes and settings in his nonfiction writing, novels, and films. This rural commitment was also manifest in his moving picture aesthetic of recycling and

---

front porch of a house) read "A demonstration of home conveniences designed to lighten the labor of the negro home maker and allow her more time for self-improvement and recreation. Such demonstrations by local men or women have stimulated the adoption of good practices and have done much to bring about a general community improvement." The brochure noted how the demonstrations resulted in the "adoption of good practices"—not the local purchases of modern laundry equipment. "A Decade of Negro Extension Work 1914-1924." U. S. Department of Agriculture Miscellaneous Circular No. 72. Washingon, D. C.: Government Printing Office, October 1926. 9.

50 What emerged from the wartime and post-war successes in agricultural expansion and rural self-sufficiency was a great diversity of people committed to modernizing rural life and stemming the tide of rural outmigration—people who, like Micheaux, believed in the practicality and viability of those goals.

re-use. James Hoberman, in a 1980 review, described Micheaux's "bad" filmmaking techniques:

> His camera ground relentlessly on while the key light wandered, traffic noise obliterated the dialogue, or a soundman's arm intruded upon the frame. Actors blew their cues, recovered, and continued. Wasting nothing, he re-used footage with impunity, carried the post-dubbing of his soundtracks to the outer limits of possibility, saved up his out-takes and fashioned them into second films....It's been said that Micheaux deliberately left mistakes in his finished films "to give the audience a laugh" ... The longer Micheaux made films, the badder they got. I'm haunted by these facts because they suggest that Micheaux knew what he was doing. And if Micheaux was a fully conscious artist, he was the greatest genius the cinema ever produced.[51]

It is my contention that Micheaux did, in fact, know what he was doing with the camera and the editing process. And he leveraged that knowledge to create truly distinctive films that traded on audiences' expectations of contemporary cinema and knowledge of recent film history. Micheaux regularly flouted film conventions in order to present a modern African American subjectivity on screen, and relied on rural aesthetics to give those new moving pictures of blackness their shape and coherence.

Hoberman was one of the first film critics to take Micheaux seriously in formal terms, and did not automatically dismiss the filmmaker's technical choices as the products of limited budgets and racist censorship laws that often demanded draconian editing of race movies. His speculative conclusions about Micheaux and intentionality were apt because, from 1910 to the present, the dominant cinematic creative mode has been respect for the "fourth wall" between audiences and filmmakers. Beginning in 1910 (largely as a result of the popular reception of new filmmaking and editing techniques pioneered by D. W. Griffith at Biograph studios), critics broke with the technological

---

51 James Hoberman, "Bad Movies," Film Comment 16. 4 (July-August 1980): 12.

vision of film that had dominated the early years of the medium, and started to call for new kinds of moving pictures.[52] Rather than long, uninterrupted film sequences of real-world events shot from a single static camera placed at some distance from the action (a type of film called "actualities"), critics and fans clamored for a new kind of cinematic naturalism created by close-up shots, and complex editing that juxtaposed shots filmed with different camera positions within the same scene.[53] Frank Woods, in the May 7th, 1910 issue of Motion Picture World, identified the new film faux-pas as an actor directly addressing the camera, or doing anything at all that would call attention to the constructed nature of film, because "immediately, the sense of reality is destroyed and the hypnotic illusion that has taken possession of the spectator's mind..is gone." Because the new close-up shots brought greater exposure, actors now had to "overcome their tendency to be theatrical...in working before the camera."[54]

In other words, starting in 1910, actors and filmmakers had to disguise the nature of their medium in order to successfully foreground film stories and themes. Micheaux used both the new narrative close-ups and parallel editing in his films (perhaps most dramatically in his frequent flashbacks and dream sequences), but instead of complying with the popular mandate to hide the constructed nature of moving pictures, he traded on

---

52 Catherine E. Kerr. "Incorporating the Star: The Intersection of Business and Aesthetic Strategies in Early American Film," The Business History Review 64. 3 (Autumn, 1990): 392-396.

53 These short, single shot documentary-style films dominated the first wave of American filmmaking in the 1890s. As "Actualities were single shot films of quotidian events: feeding a baby, workers leaving a factory, a man riding a bicycle. The camera is placed at a neutral distance from the subject and the action unfolds without direction." Dina Ciraulo, "Narrative Style in Oscar Micheaux's Within Our Gates," Wide Angle 20. 4 (October 1998): 79.

54 Kerr, 397, 383-410.

that expectation to startle and delight his audiences. Arguably, the most dramatic extant example of this occured in his 1924 film Body and Soul, in which Micheaux interrupted the narrative with several seconds of footage of scantily clad dancers in a club—footage that bore no relation to the overall plot or the particular scene it bisected. My contention is that Micheaux accomplished less dramatic (but equally effective) violations of the fourth wall when he re-used familiar pieces of film in new movies, and effectively recycled older filmmaking conventions and stars from the vaudeville stage in his 1920s movies—choices which aligned him aesthetically with modern rural production and conservation traditions.

Dina Ciraulo, in her study of narrative style in Within Our Gates, noted that Micheaux:

> bends the rules of classical Hollywood form to suit his own needs. He uses some conventional production practices, such as consistent screen direction and having actors enter and exit an empty frame for smoother continuity, yet abandons other standard techniques.[55]

For example, Micheaux eschewed a linear narrative, relied on tableaux shots that evoked older documentary-style filmmaking, and also routinely blended genres (in the case of Within Our Gates, combining the melodrama, the gangster film, and the Hollywood romance) which tended to be distinct in mainstream films. Micheaux's tableau shots (filmed with a static camera position and no extreme close-ups or long shots, with subjects typically centered in the frame, and little visual competition from other planes of action or backgrounds) are important because, as Ciraulo argued, they created a central space for African American characters—a visual grammar of "full, uncompromised

55 Ciraulo, 76.

depiction" of and for African Americans.[56] They are also important because, by harkening back to the documentary-style "actualities" of the previous era in filmmaking, the tableaux shots created a "fairness of perspective and a sense of objectivity" about both the central subject and its environment. To further build that reality-effect, Micheaux made "reference to actual places and events...of particular importance to the African American community," as well as focused his camera on objects and information that connoted objectivity: newspaper clippings, telegrams, and statistics (for example, about lynching in the American South).[57] In my view, Micheaux's reality-effect was an ideological critique of the absence of black subjectivity in mainstream films—which presented stable African American stereotypes rather than complex individuals with the potenial for movement, change, and variety of experience. As Eva Cherniavsky argued, Hollywood cinema was an ideological instrument that presupposed and played to the security that white people experienced as embodied subjects; mainstream films were deemed realistic by white audiences because they confirmed a very particular, secure white subjectivity.[58] By moving African Americans into the center of his films, and using

---

56 In making the argument about the visual (and thus emotional and psyhological) centrality of African American characters, Ciraulo cites Gilles Deleuze's concept of the "rarefied frame": "'The big screen and depth of field in particular have allowed the multiplication of independent data, to the point where a secondary scene appears in the foreground while the main one happens in the background...or where you can no longer even distinguish between the principal and the secondary....On the other hand, rarefied images are produced, either when the whole accent is placed on a single object...or when the set is emptied of certain sub-sets.'" Ciraulo, 77. Tableaux shots offered a potential economic advantage, as they could be done by virtually any camera operator (not just the highly skilled), but their aesthetic benefits were also quite substantial—and clearly appealed to Micheaux's desire to legitimize African American subjects and issues on the big screen.

57 Ciraulo, 79-80.

58 Eva Cherniavsky, Incorporations: Race, Nation, and the Body Politics of Capital (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006).

an alternative set of approaches and techniques to create a reality-effect that reinforced the subjectivity of his black characters, Micheaux worked against mainstream visual arguments for a stable, embodied whiteness.[59] My extended discussion of shot types may seem anachronistic in a discussion of black subjectivity, but the currency of this type of formalist inquiry is underscored by recent critical work in African American studies that asks readers to think about New Negro visual culture in broad terms, and to assess its relevance to the literary arts.[60]

---

59 Micheaux's ideological critique comes very close to that sketched out by Shirley Thompson about Charles Chesnutt (a fiction writer whose work Micheaux adapted for the screen). Thompson identifies in Chesnutt's short stories the beginings of an African American counterculture of incorporation, and argues that Chesnutt worked across class lines with the formally and stylistically provocative strategies of conjure and dialect in order to call attention to "fictions of race and the absurdities of life on the color line" that excluded African Americans from American political and cultural institutions. In a post-Civil War era when narratives of national identity helped former beligerants to reconcile, Chesnutt's stories challenged the core assumption of incorporation: the fundamental self-possession of laboring and leisured subjects. In place of certainty about subjectivity, Chesnutt substituted the competing perspectives of John (the new white landowner) and Julius (his coachman, who was formerly enslaved on the plantation). These "overlapping but incongruous perspectives" reveal a myriad of economic and corporeal strategies used by Chesnutt's rural black characters that illustrate and make focal the very insecure African American self-possession that resulted from slavery and its legacies. Shirley E. Thompson, "The Hard Work of Black Play: Chesnutt's Conjure Tales and the Counterculture of Incorporation." Leisure Studies 27.4 (2008): 411-26.

60 Shawn Michelle Smith's 1999 study of race and nineteenth century photography initiated a vital scholarly conversation about visual culture's role in constructing African American identity. Shawn Michelle Smith, American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999). More recently, Cherene Sherrard-Johnson's study of mulatta iconography noted that "[h]istorically, studies of the era have focused on the intersection between music (specifically, jazz and the blues) and poetry, avoiding the equally pertinent traffic between fiction and visual arts" that has significant bearing on shifting racial definitions and understandings. Cherene Sherrard-Johnson, Portraits of the New Negro Woman: Visual and Literary Culture in the Harlem Renaissance (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2007): xvi. And Nicole Fleetwood has argued that the logic of racial visibility reproduces itself across twentieth-century representational genres and pop cultural forms. Nicole

Micheaux juxtaposed the tableaux shots so characteristic of Within Our Gates with different types of shots, both in that film and in his 1920 silent movie Symbol of the Unconquered, which was set in the rural West and featured a diversity of African American, white, Native American, and immigrant characters of various ethnicities. One example of this juxtaposition occurs in the shot sequence immediately following the intertitle "A hideout in the woods":

Figure 8. Symbol of the Unconquered Stills: A Hideout in the Woods

Fleetwood, Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2011).


After the intertitle, the first shot is of a cabin in the mid-distance, with a tree trunk in the right foreground. The next is through a stationary iris—a long shot from a different vantage, also through the trees, in which two men walk through the woods, pass between two trees, and stop next to the trunk of one; one of the men raises his arm and points.[61] The third shot is a close-up of the two men, one still pointing (the trunks of the two trees border the frame). The next shot is a repeat of the initial shot of the cabin in the mid-distance. The fifth shot returns to the two men, one of whom is still pointing; he lowers his arm, and the two men walk out of the frame. The final shot of the sequence is of the two men, shot from behind, walking toward and arriving at the cabin—which is finally pictured with them in the same frame. Six shots, when arguably the final shot alone would have adequately advanced the narrative and gotten the men to the cabin in which they plot the first in a series of land thefts.

This scene outside the cabin takes twenty-four seconds, and typifies the complex shot series that Micheaux created and juxtaposed with his tableaux shots: extreme close-

61 An iris is an expanding or diminishing circle that blacks out a portion of the screen so only part of the image can be seen. The technique was commonly used in silent films, including The Birth of a Nation (1915).

ups, narrative interruptions such as flashbacks,[62] and parallel editing of simultaneous events (for example, multiple shots of the heroine, Eve Mason, struggling through the rainstorm and falling down into a puddle, intercut with shots of the innkeeper who denied her a room looking out the window at her travail and laughing uproariously from the warmth and comfort of his plush, white-sheeted bed).[63] Micheaux also frequently froze the iris in place, and used it to distinguish flashbacks, memories, and thoughts that interrupted his films' linear narratives. His iris resembled the tableaux shot because it directed viewers' attention on a single portion of the screen, but intensified the effect because Micheaux often used it to focus on a single African American character, and thus signal his or her importance. The iris was also the gateway to an individual's past, as well as to a character's interior life. As such, it presented complex pictures of black selfhood in which individual thoughts, feelings, and aspirations were bound up with community and family history—often rural history. Micheaux's technical prowess is particularly evident in a close-up shot of Eve smiling in her sleep, in which a small image of the hero's (Hugh Van Allen's) face hovers in the dark upper right corner of the frame—an effect which required the careful superposition of two reels of film. A second example of Micheaux's technical skill is set in the Smith Brothers Saloon:

Figure 9. Symbol of the Unconquered Film Still: Before the Saloon Fight

62 For example, when the hotelkeeper (who is passing for white) realizes that his new client (Eve Mason) is black—and suddenly remembers being accidentally outed as Negro by his dark-skinned mother, and, as a result, losing his white fiance.

63 This close reading is based on the one known print of Symbol of the Unconquered, which was found in 1993 in Spain; its intertitles were subseqently transcribed and translated back into English by Charles Musser.

In the opening shot in the sequence, Driscoll, who is bragging to the crowd about besting the hero Van Allen in a horse sale, fails to see Van Allen enter the room. The next shot is of a small promotional mirror hung on the saloon wall, in which both Driscoll and Van Allen are reflected. It is in this mirror image that Driscoll looks up from his drink, sees his rival, and turns slowly to face him. Neither the obvious presence of the camera, nor any extraneous visual material, interrupts the precision of this very difficult shot.

The complexity and diversity of techniques employed by Micheaux early in his film career suggest that he recycled older filmmaking conventions such as the tableaux shot not out of naivete or a lack of new technical skills, but rather because those methods were still of use, and could be successfully juxtaposed with newer filmmaking techniques to create meaning. In much in the same way that his unconventional film company

photograph in the Simms business directory could trade upon its conventional context, Micheaux juxtaposed his "old school" filmmaking techniques with cutting-edge shot types and editing—the combination of which aligned him squarely with rural production and conservation aesthetics, which called for making use of both new and time-honored techniques and materials. Micheaux reused film from one production to another, recycled plots, and reused supposedly antiquated shot types.[64] He made both his own and more well-known novels into silent movies, and then remade some of those same films as "talkies."[65] A case can be made that he even re-used stars from the vaudeville and dramatic stage, despite the fact that the silent film format precluded the use of their vocal performance talents.

One of the challenges created by the new Hollywood-style film techniques was that they necessitated stars. In the era before close-ups, movie actors were somewhat interchangeable; not so after D.W. Griffith revolutionized film techniques. Beginning in 1910, America saw a boom of fan interest in individual actors—long before most film companies identified the names of their on-camera players, and a full two years before

---

64 Micheaux seems to have employed a "waste not, want not" approach to filming, took good advantage of impromptu opportunities, and stockpiled that footage for future use. His actress Elcora "Shingsie" Howard "recalled that they once went to a white neighborhood early in the morning and, with no one at home, quickly shot her at he door of an elegant house. Howard also remembered that when she was working in the company's office, a woman wearing a fur coat arrived for an appointment. Micheaux guided the woman into an interior office and quickly shot Howard with the fur on." Howard (the daughter of a well-to-do Pennsylvania deacon and elocutionist, who Micheaux recruited at age sixteen), was the most notable exception to Micheaux's tendency to hire well-known and well-heeled actors. Howard starred in many of Micheaux's films and also helped edit and distribute his films. Bowser and Spence, 35, 40.

65 Micheaux remade his 1924 film Veiled Aristocrats as a talkie in 1932; he also remade his 1924 silent film Birthright as a talkie in 1939.

the first mass-circulated fan magazines.[66] Starting in 1910, numerous fans wrote to film companies and described particular actors, asked about them, and sometimes complained when a favorite actor was not featured in a new release. The boom of interest in particular actors coincided with the shift in popular film length, as longer feature films developed in Europe start to hit the American market in 1911 and 1912. Forward-thinking producers formed film companies to produce for the new "features craze," and stars (such as Mary Pickford) were the new centerpieces of these lavish productions. By 1916,

> with such high salaries, stars formed an effective barrier to entry. Producers trying to break into the system had to either exceed rival offers or create their own stars—an expensive proposition given the huge start-up costs of orchestrated nationwide promotional campaigns.[67]

Not one to look a proverbial gift-horse in the mouth, Micheaux hired many actors who were already well-heeled in the black press, and perhaps undervalued for their visual performances. Paul Robeson, after his stage successes in Eugene O'Neill's The Emperor Jones and All God's Chillun Got Wings, made his film debut in Micheaux's 1924 Body and Soul. Before she appeared on screen, Micheaux's first leading lady, Evelyn Preer, was a vaudeville and minstrel show actress and singer who had also toured nationally with Anita Bush's Lafayette Players (a pioneering theater company that brought broadway-style dramas to black audiences). As Bowser and Spence noted, Micheaux cast at least twelve other members of the Lafayette Players in his silent films, and also made the unconventional choice to cast experienced vaudeville actors in dramatic roles.[68]

---

66 Kerr, 398.

67 Kerr, 407.

68 The Lafayette Players cast by Micheaux include Evelyn Preer, Ida Anderson, Andrew Bishop, Laura Bowman, Lawrence Chenault, Inez Clough, A. B. De Comathiere, Cleo Desmond, Alice Gorgas, Iris Hall, Lionel Monagas, Susie Sutton, and Edward Thompson. Vaudeville players given dramatic film roles by Micheaux include E. G. Tatum, Salem Tutt Whitney, J. Homer Tutt, and S. T. Jacks. Bowser and Spence, 43-44.

Although Micheaux would sometimes make casting decisions based on an actor's personal wardrobe (he typically expected his actors to provide costumes, in part because of his limited budgets), and also occasionally advertised for extras in local newspapers, he most often gravitated toward experienced stage actors who "came with a following." The advantage of this was an automatic fan base: "people who had heard about their stage work or had read about them in the Black weeklies could now see them on screen."[69] The choice also squarely aligned him with rural reuse traditions.[70]

1920s viewers were meant to connect characters with rural life and virtue through Booker T. Washingon, the symbolic figure of black agricultural and industrial uplift. Ultimately, though, Micheaux's rural aesthetics were much more far-reaching, and also manifested themselves in many of his film themes and storylines. When Eve Mason, the heroine of Symbol of the Unconquered, arrived at the backwoods cabin left to her by her late grandfather, aside from a small mirror, the only obviously decorative item in the rough-hewn room was a portrait of Booker T. Washington. The camera paused on this picture for several seconds (framing it in an iris). Likewise, Micheaux drew attention to the virtuous Sister Martha's portrait of Washington in Body and Soul—a portrait which is frequently visible and visually central in the scenes set in her modest home. Micheaux's rural commitments manifested themselves at the level of the of the shot itself (in the

---

69 Bowser and Spence, 44.

70 What this choice meant further down the road was that, unlike Hollywood, Micheaux did not have to jettision many of his stars in when sound film technology was developed and "talkies" became the norm. Film actors who had not worked on the stage were suddenly at a competitive disadvantage. Many Hollywood stars of the silent era found their careers abruptly ended by the advent of movie sound because their voices, accents, and vocal delivery were not what audiences imagined. The presence of sound also made many of the exaggerated gestures and facial expressions (once necessary to convey meaning in silent film) seem unnatural and overblown.

visual grammar of camera angles, depth of field, and focus), the structure of the films he created, and the materials out of which he fashioned them. His silent films were both aesthetically anti-Hollywood and pro-rural. His blatant (and often dazzling) reuse of actors, material, and older filmmaking techniques broke the popular taboo against exposing the artificial nature of the film media; it also pioneered a moving picture aesthetics based on rural economy, frugality, and conspicuous production.

DOWN ON THE FARM

Scholars have often categorized Micheaux's publicity photographs such as the one that appeared in the Simms directory as disingenouous—part and parcel of his effort to glamorize himself through an embellished Western past. But Micheaux had, in fact, paid his dues as a rural farmer and author, and had a complex relationship with country life. Roland Marchand, in Advertising the American Dream, noted that advertising executives in the 1920s and 1930s were likely to bolster their professional credibility by citing even tenuous personal ties to rural or small town America, in part because of a widespread fear that urban provinciality would put them out of step with the majority of American consumers.[71] Unlike these urban executives, Micheaux spent eight years of his adult life working on farms, and he regularly left big city life in Chicago to shoot films in more affordable rural locales and to tour with his new releases. Also, long before the association would garner him any tangible professional benefits, he was promoting black migration to the rural West—although, on more than one occasion, he stretched the truth in the process.

---

71 "William Benton recalled that while he was a partner in Benton and Bowles, the men of the Frigidaire company in Dayton had accused him of heading a contingent of 'city slickers'; he met the challenge by replying that 'the biggest town any one of them comes from is Cloquet, Minnesota.'" Roland Marchand, Advertising the American Dream (Berkeley: U of California P, 1986): 36-7.

As early as 1910, Micheaux exhorted African American readers to leave both the South and the urban North for rural life in the American West. The first known newspaper article by Micheaux, "Where the Negro Fails," was published on the Chicago Defender's front page on March 19th, 1910. In it, Micheaux declared that:

> [a]ny energetic young man with as little as $1000 and up and willing to give all his time and attention to the upbuilding of the future can go into Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, get a homestead...which costs from $25 to $45 per acre...and in ten years time be independent.

But instead of sharing his first-person perspective as a black homesteader near Winner, South Dakota, or discussing his own family's extensive history with succesful western migration, Micheaux dissembled about his identity. He wrote from the fictional perspective of an urban advisor to a young railroad employee who was engaged to a Chicago society lady, and reported both his initial attempts to discourage the young man from settling in the West and his subsequent realization of the wisdom of the homesteading plan. Micheaux's front page article of October 28, 1911 followed up on this theme of the economic viability of Western settlement. In "Colored Americans Too Slow to Take Advantage of Great Land Opportunities Given Free by the Government," Micheaux again adopted a fictionalized persona (of a "government crop expert").[72] But

72 In point of fact, real government crop experts tended to be less sanguine about farming prospects on the allotment lands. Sara T. Phillips noted that 1900 to 1910 was a "decade of experimentation and debate" about dry farming in the U.S., and a variety of experts weighed in on opposite sides of the issue. This was a hot topic, as dry farming in the Great Plains states added the largest number of cultivated acres in the country after 1900. Successful homesteaders such as Hardy Webster Campbell promoted their farming techniques, railroad companies operated model farms on the plains to attract settlers, and the federal government, though land grant universities and agricultural experiment stations, funded experimental dry-farms in almost every western state (and generously shared their findings both domestically and abroad). "The USDA in particular took a cautious stance toward further development of the arid regions. In 1905, the USDA had establishes the Office of Dry Land Agriculture under the leadership of E. C. Chilcott, a former agronomist in South Dakota. Though Chilcott continued to advocate the use of

this time, he also discussed his real-life success farming wheat and flax, and noted with satisfaction the appreciation in the value of his own farm land (up from $7 to $20 per acre).[73]

In his 1911 Chicago Defender article, Micheaux ignored the irony that the new rural opportunities for African Americans were predicated on constricted rural options for Native Americans, from whom most of the "free" land had been recently taken.[74] And he also failed to mention the fact that neither farming nor western settlement were new things for his family. Micheaux's paternal grandmother, Melvina, along with three of her children, were part of the Exoduster movement to Kansas in the 1870s (a post-Reconstruction black migration of thousands of African Americans seeking freedom and economic opportunity that was chronicled in Nell Irvin Painter's 1992 book Exodusters);

---

soil-preserving tillage techniques, he warned that no set of scientific prescriptions could ever ensure success in the risky arid regions." Sara T. Phillips, "Lessons from the Dust Bowl: Dryland Agriculture and Soil Erosion in the United States and South Africa, 1900-1950." Environmental History 4. 2 (April 1999): 249-50.

73 The average price of U.S. land per acre in 1910 (not including buildings and equipment) was $32.40. J. L. Coulter, "Agricultural Development in the United States, 1900-1910. The Quarterly Journal of Economics 27.1 (Nov., 1912): 11. Although the early editorial policy of the Chicago Defender was to promote black migration to the urban North, the paper also ran other articles about western settlement, such as the 9/23/11 piece "3,000 Homesteads Free...Beat the Foreigner to This Land" about the South Dakota allotments.

74 Micheaux's fictional protagonist in The Conquest dramatically exemplifies this attitude in his discussion of settlement near the town of Amro: "The town of Amro, being surrounded by Indian allotments, had few settlers in its immediate vicinity. The Indians, profiting by their experience in Megory county, where they learned that good location meant increase in the value of their lands, had, in selecting allotments, taken nearly all the land just west of Amro, as they had taken practically all of the the good land just west of Calias in the eastern part of Tipp county. The good land all over the county had been picked over and the Indians had selected much of the best, but Tipp county is a large one, and several hundred thousand acres of good land were available for homesteading, though much scattered as to location." Micheaux, The Conquest, 167.

Micheaux's uncle Andrew accumulated 800 acres of land in Barton County, gained the reputation of being "the richest Negro in Kansas and banker to the black community," and later became an early investor in Micheaux's film company. Micheaux's uncle Edward moved further West—to California—and lived in Oakland in the 1890s before joining the back-to-Africa movement and relocating to the Republic of Liberia, where he died in 1910. Micheaux's maternal grandparents and his mother, Bell, migrated West from Kentucky (where they had been slaves) a year after the end of the Civil War, and settled in southern Illinois in 1866—where Micheaux was born on his parents' 40-acre farm eighteen years later.[75] For most of the Micheaux family, it was the rural West—not the urban North—that had long-provided economic opportunity and social mobility.

The Chicago Defender is frequently identified as a major catalyst of the Great Migration, the mass-exodus of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North in the early twentieth century. The Defender's publisher, Robert S. Abbott, ran his first article about black southern outmigration on March 2, 1911, but did not begin "hammering away at the South in earnest" until 1916-1917—with a barrage of articles, editorials, cartoons, and photographs that sung the praises of the North and identified the shortcomings of life in the South.[76] Abbot not only published invectives against the racist southern treatment of African Americans, he also printed practical advice about how to migrate to northern cities, and went so far as to set up departure schedules (typically after pay day on Wednesday and Saturday nights) and negotiate special "club rates" with the

---

75 McGilligan, 5-7.

76 The first article the Chicago Defender published promoting black southern outmigration was on March 2, 1911. The paper was particularly influential because of its large circulation, approximately two-thirds of which was in the South. Patrick Scott Washburn, The African American Newspaper (Evanston: Northwestern UP 2006): 88.

railroads so groups of ten to fifty migrants could travel together for reduced fares.[77] Abbott's advocacy has been characterized as anti-rural, but in point of fact he printed Micheaux's articles promoting black settlement in the rural West before beginning his newspaper's campaign against the South. He also befriended and defended the artist when elite Chicagoans tried to censor his early films about rural life, shared Micheaux's belief about the importance of interracial contact in breaking down racial prejudice, and ultimately came to share his feelings about the limits of urban opportunity for African Americans after the race riots of 1919—when the Great Migration had clearly swelled Chicago's black population to proportions beyond the infrastructure capacity of the city's segregated black neighborhoods.[78] Although Great Migration historiography tends to overlook this fact, being vehemently anti-southern was not necessarily the same thing as being down on farming and rural life. Micheaux and other African American artists believed this wholeheartedly, and found various creative ways to make the case for black rural opportunity the early decades of the twentieth century.[79]

---

77 Interracial contact was the key to black progress according to Abbott. "With this burgeoning prestige and circulation, Abbott began running stories about how blacks were better off in the North. He believed a larger population of blacks in the North would decrease racial prejudice there. 'Only by a commingling with other races will the bars be let down and the black man take his place in the limelight beside his white brother,' the Defender proclaimed in 1916, adding "Contact means everything." Washburn, 88-9.

78 Washburn, 109-11. Jayna Brown, in her introduction to a reprint edition of Micheaux's first novel, The Conquest, noted that "In response to the black people migrating from the rural South to midwestern, southern, and northern industrial cities in the first decades of the century, factions of the black urban middle class organized as reformers, dedicated to the moral education of these migrants. Throughout his career Micheaux laced his words with ethical catechisms for the migrants, criticizing them for the lack of an appropriate work ethic and for their participation in alternative economies, such as numbers running, bootlegging, and welfare fraud." Micheaux, The Conquest, xi.

79 Chicago was a fitting place to publish this kind of rural black advocacy writing, as the city was "nature's metropolis," inseparable from the larger agricultural

Although it is unclear whether Micheaux knew more about the economic risks of homesteading than he let on in his 1910 and 1911 newspaper articles, one thing is certain: he wrote the articles encouraging blacks to settle in the West during a severe drought in South Dakota—a drought that ultimately caused him to lose a significant amount of his land to foreclosure in 1912, 1913, and 1914.[80] The picture of Western farming in Micheaux's journalistic accounts is much more sanguine than that in his early novels, which unflinchingly depicted the hazards of rural life, ranging from the logistical to the physical to the psychological: the complications of filing land claims, the dangers of snow storms, coping with accidents in animal-drawn vehicles, the threat of prairie fires to person and property, the devastating effects of prolonged drought, the difficulties of financing and making payments for large land purchases, and the profound sense of loneliness suffered by black settlers who find themselves romantically isolated in their white and Native American communities. Micheaux's fictional heroes and heroines all opposed miscegenation—which drastically limited their choice of romantic partners, but put them in accord with a myriad of laws established by their newly-created western states. But opposing miscegenation was hardly a straightforward proposition, as racial categories themselves were in flux in the region.

Both immigration and the forced assimilation of Native American tribes complicated racial definitions in this period, and put relationships between whites, African Americans, and Native Americans on ever-shifting footing. South Dakota

---

region from which it drew the materials for its prospertity. William Cronon, Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992).

80 Gregory County Regsiter of Deeds, Burke, South Dakota. Cited in Writing Himself Into History by Bowser and Spence, 9. For a copy of Micheaux's BLM land patents, see: http://shorock.com/arts/micheaux/source.html. For information about the drought, see Herbert S. Schell, History of South Dakota (Lincoln: U Nebraska P, 1975): 257.

enacted miscegenation laws which made marriage and cohabitation between whites and blacks felonies in 1909 (punishable by fines of up to $1,000, up to ten years imprisonment, or both). In 1913, prompted by new waves of immigration, the state expanded that prohibition to also preclude people of Korean, Malayan, or Mongolian descent from marrying or living with white people. When Jim Crow laws in Oklahoma declared Indians to be white around this same time, many African American tribal members were forced to move into segregated communities (in 1912, the Eight Circuit Court of Appeals noted that approximately one-third of the citizens of the Seminole Nation were of African American descent). Tribes in the region were also pressured to define membership by new blood quantum formulas, which resulted in additional tribal exclusions.[81] But Micheaux flattened much of this racial complexity in his Great Plains fiction by ignoring the myriad complicated relationships between blacks and Native Americans, and happily resolving the apparent cross-racial attractions of his lead characters. Indeed, the plots of many of Micheaux's frontier novels turn on the popular idea that blackness can be intuited through close social contact—a belief that justifies the repressed love between his African American heroes and apparently-white heroines (who learn of their own African ancestry near the end of the novels, thereby freeing everyone to act on their "natural" and appropriate affections).[82]

---

81 Melinda Mico, "'Blood and Money': The Case of Seminole Freedmen and Seminole Indians in Oklahoma." Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds: The African Diaspora in Indian Country, Tiya Miles and Sharon P. Holland, eds. (Durham: Duke UP, 2006): 133-4.

82 Mark Smith documened the social currency of the idea that racial identity could be sensed in this era when miscegenation and migration made it increasingly difficult to visually distinguish blacks from other racial groups. Mark M. Smith, How Race is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2006): 75.

Much of what literary scholars and biographers claim to know about Micheaux's early life is extraoplated from his novels about homesteading, and not corroborated by nonfiction sources. His books' realist style and vivid contextual details, as well as Micheaux's habit of asserting the historical accuracy of his films and novels, make this understandable, and yet it is still vexing—particulary when it comes to arguments about the artist's relationship to rural life.[83] Micheaux's novels are wonderful for their perceptions about and conventions of describing rural practices during the homesteading era, but they are not conclusive sources of information about what Micheaux himself did; he was known to exaggerate and prevaricate about personal information even in his nonfiction writing, where there was a reasonable expectation of accuracy. Because of this, it is at present impossible to determine whether Micheaux was a good farmer who suffered reverses of fortune due to factors largely out of his control, or whether he was an unskilled farmer able to expertly capture and chronicle in writing what he was unable to do on the land. What we can know about for certain is the context in which he farmed, and the way he represented those circumstances in his novels—both of which tell us some important things about his particular rural struggles and commitments, and provide a framework for assessing the films he made and distributed in 1920s.

Much of the critical work on Micheaux published in the 1970s and 1980s argued that Micheaux based many of his books and movies on autobiographical material, which he exaggerated and sensationalized—the implication being that the artist was a Thoreau-like character who played farmer mainly to write about the experience (and later to promote his movies). The reality was that Micheaux started writing in earnest only when

---

83 For example, Micheaux frequently described Within Our Gates as "8000 Feet of Sensational Realism" in film publicity, and described film itself as "miniature replica of life" in a Pittsburgh Courier letter on 12/13/24. Bowser and Spence, 125, 131 .

his farming career failed. Then, after finishing his first three novels, he turned to filmmaking.[84] Micheaux's choice to become an artist was more unusual than his choice to become a farmer. He was born and raised on his family's 40-acre farm about six miles outside of Metropolis, Illinois (ten of which were "unimproved" woodland, twenty-eight of which were planted with wheat and corn, and three of which were a garden). When he was born in 1884, his family owned a horse, two cheap mules, two cows, six hogs, two dogs, a wagon, a sewing machine, a clock, twenty dollars' worth of agricultural tools, and some household furniture.[85] And far from trading on his own rural history, Micheaux frequently downplayed his family's extensive farming background in his frontier novels.[86]

Despite the ways in which many of Micheaux's critics have portrayed it, homesteading in South Dakota was a far cry from hobby farming at Walden Pond.

---

84 Gerald R. Butters, using business correspondence in the Lincoln Motion Picture File of the George P. Johnson Collection at the University of California, Los Angeles, described exactly how this switch in media happened: "The popularity of Micheaux's novel The Homesteader eventually drew the attention of George P. Johnson, the booking manager of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, one of the most successful black film enterprises. The Lincoln Company expressed interest in filming the novel and Micheaux travelled to Omaha, Nebraska for discussions. The contract was negotiated and drawn up, but at the last moment Micheaux inisisted that he should supervise the motion picture production. He wanted an expanded format from the standard three-reel Lincoln production to a six-reel feature. This was not acceptable to the Lincoln Company and the project fell through. The desire to have his novel made into a motion picture on his own terns led to the formation of the Micheaux Film and Book Company in 1919." Gerald R. Butters, "Portrayals of Black Masculinity in Oscar Micheaux's The Homesteader." Literature/Film Quarterly 28.1 (2000): 55.

85 McGilligan, 5-7.

86 For example, in The Conquest, instead of identifying the exoduster descendants in Kansas as his own relatives, Micheaux eschews any personal connection between these successful farmers and his protagonist, Oscar Devereaux—who describes them not as kin (aunts, uncles, and cousins), but as "many prosperous colored families." Micheaux, The Conquest, 176.

Micheaux was one of the first farmers on Rosebud Reservation land that had been recently appropriated by the U.S. Government from the Sioux and offered to non-Indian homesteaders.[87] The Government's rationale was that these land sales would help integrate Indians into mainstream American culture by making them into yeoman farmers, and would also ease the tensions in overcrowded cities; the newly available farm land would create a kind of "safety valve" against urban discontent by giving people in overcrowded areas somewhere else to settle.[88] Micheaux was particularly concerned about black urban discontent, and repeatedly noted in his newspaper articles, novels, and films the very real restrictions placed on black occupational success in cities.[89] The rural

87 John Hudson noted that the Dakota settlements were authorized much earlier, under the 1862 Homestead Act, which stipulated that "any American citizen, or alien who had filed his or her intention papers, if twenty-one years of age or over, or if the head of a family, or if he had served in the army or navy of the United States, and if he or she had never fought against the United States or given aid and comfort to an enemy of the United States in time of war, could, for a ten dollar fee file claim to as many as 160 acres of hitherto unappropriated public land. If the individual resided upon or cultivated the same for the term of five years immediately succeeding the time of filing, he or she could obtain the final patent on the homestead upon payment of another commission. (12th United States Statutes at Large, pp. 392-93.) In 1900 Congress authorized any person who had already commuted a homestead entry to file on a second one. (31 Stat.L., pp. 269-70)." John Hudson, "Two Dakota Homestead Frontiers," Annals of the Association of American Geographers 63. 4 (Dec. 1973): 443.

88 Richard Slotkin, The Fatal Environment (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1998): 284-5.

89 As Quintard Taylor has noted, even in western cities such as Denver, Los Angeles, Oakland, Portland, San Francisco, and Seattle, the majority of African American men and women worked as servants from the turn of the century until World War II (Houston, with its high number of manufacturing jobs, was the one exception). Only a small number of black men were able to find urban work in manufacturing, trade, and professional service. Quintard Taylor, In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990 (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1999): 223-4.

West, in Micheaux's view, provided more opportune ground for black entrepreneurship and independent employment[90] —both of which he equated with manliness.[91]

In 1890, the year after South Dakota became a state, the U.S. Government confiscated Sioux lands there and started redistributing them in 160-acre parcels. From 1904-1911, thousands of acres west of the Missouri River were taken from the Rosebud Sioux Tribe and granted to settlers.[92] In 1904, the first of the Rosebud Reservation lands were offered to a heterogeneous group of homesteaders, ranging from recent European immigrants, to land speculators, to merchants, to working-class Americans from different regions of the country put off by overcrowding in cities and high land prices in the established agricultural regions. Micheaux was one of only a handful of African

---

90 In his fictional accounts of farming on the plains, Micheaux was particularly discouraging about even Pullman porter work—a relatively high-status job for urban blacks. Micheaux's protagonists discussed how the unfair wage scale encouraged dishonesty, and described the "near-slave conditions" under which porters were expected to work. Oscar Micheaux, The Conquest, (New York: Washington Square Press, 2003): 39.

91 As Gail Bederman has argued, manliness was inextricably bound up with beliefs about citizenship and questions of state action, and, as a discourse, was often inchoate and contradictory. Although the larger historical shift taking place between 1880 and 1917 was from a model of manliness that stressed restraint, self-control, and responsibility to a "strenuous" masculinity validated by physical strength, action, and aggression, there was room within the protean category to advocate for and against any number of pursuits and occupations. Gail Bederman, Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917 (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995). As Martin Summers has argued, middle class African Americans such as Micheaux could (and did) trade on and contest popular assumptions about black male primitivism to re-form masculinity so that it maintained its moral dimensions and prerogatives, and, as a result, remained central in many very different African American uplift programs. Martin Summers, Manliness and its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900-1930 (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2004).

92 The Rosebud Sioux are branch of the Lakota people also known as the Sicangu Lakota or Sicangu Oyate.

Americans in this latter category.[93] He bought his first parcel of Rosebud Reservation land just south of the town of Gregory in 1904, after failing to win a claim in the land lottery held in Gregory County.[94] He later bought additional claims in nearby Tripp County, west of the town of Winner, and ultimately owned nearly 1,000 acres of land in the state.[95]

Relationships between Indians and settlers were often tense, as the Sicangu people faced discrimination when they left the recently-established Rosebud Reservation. Some tribal members fought assimilation by supporting a private Jesuit-run school on the reservation that promoted bilingual and bicultural education rather than forced conformity to Anglo agrarian practices and ways of thought. Others resisted by scaring off or stealing cattle driven through traditional tribal lands by settlers. Micheaux's protagonists in his early novels and films had little empathy for displaced native people, used disrespectful terms such as "half-breed," and criticised the local Indians' failure to cultivate their allottments, and even went so far as to condone the beating and lynching of Indian cattle thiefs—despite Micheaux's own vigorous opposition to the lynching of African Americans.[96] Despite the current scholarly emphasis on connections between

---

93 In 1900, there were no African Americans in Gregory and Tripp Counties; the 1910 Census counted 18 Negro males and 7 Negro females, out of a total population of 21,384.

94 The fact that Micheaux did not win a lottery parcel is not a surprise, though his fictional accounts of western land lotteries are indeed dramatic. More than one hundred thousand people signed up for approximately 2,500 homesteads in the first lottery. John Hudson noted that the ratio of applicants to awarded claims for the 1907 Rosebud opening was more than 28:1. Hudson, 456.

95 There is little documentation on Micheaux's early filmmaking practices, but we do know that he returned to Winner to shoot at least part of his 1919 film version of The Homesteader. Bowser and Spence, 41.

96 Micheaux, The Conquest, 115.

African American and Native American experiences, Micheaux's fictional African American characters were phenomenally unreflective about the interconnections of:

> key issues in African American diasporic experience, such as migration, freedom, citizenship, belonging, peoplehood, and cultural retention and creation, and key issues in Native American experience, such as tribalism, protection of homelands, self-determination, political sovereignty, and cultural-spiritual preservation and renewal.[97]

Those silences were deliberate and purposeful; following a pattern described by Tiye Miles and Sharon Holland in Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds, Micheaux's black pioneer protagonists "transformed Indians into a vehicle for black identity formation and racial uplift" by using them as foils against which modern black western selfhood could be defined. As Daniel Moos claimed, Micheaux's fiction displayed Turnerian values because of the unique position of Native Americans (singularly excluded from the frontier settler community on the basis of race).[98] Micheaux's choice to isolate Indians in his novels about day-to-day farming and ranch life suggested that Native peoples remained culturally apart—separate from the forces of modernization that shaped the lives of non-Native settlers.

Although typical, Micheaux's choice to exclude Native Americans from his depictions of modern rural life was far from the only available creative option. Popular entertainers of his era both challenged and perpetuated entrenched ideas about the

---

97 Tiya Miles and Sharon P. Holland, eds., Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds: The African Diaspora in Indian Country (Durham: Duke UP, 2006): 7-10.

98 Daniel Moos described Micheaux himself as a "black Turnerian" because he combined Booker T. Washington's principles of hard work, thrift, and practical training with Frederick Jackson Turner's commitment to homesteading on the American frontier. As I stated earlier in this chapter, I am uncomfortable with the scholarly conflation of Micheaux and his fictional protagonists; I also disagree with Moos's argument that Micheaux, "rather than bringing race to the South Dakota frontier, subordinate his black identity in the West in favor of a trans-racial humanism based on financial success." Moos, 357.

inevitable opposition of western settlers and Indians. As Amy Ware noted, in the early twentieth century, the popular Cherokee entertainer Will Rogers faced the dilemma of depicting modern Indianness to an audience that was unable (or unwilling) to recognize it:

> Throughout his early career, from approximately 1903 to 1919, Rogers and his audience grappled with these seemingly conflicting roles of cowboy and Indian, characters steeped in a seeming ethnic conflict yet embodied simultaneously by Rogers.[99]

Growing up, Rogers worked as a cowboy on his family's Oklahoma ranch, alongside other Cherokees, Creeks, African Americans, whites, and "at least one Chinese man who ran the chuck wagon."[100] At age 23, he joined the Wild West performance circuit, and later worked in vaudeville. As a celebrity cowboy and trick-roping specialist, he repeatedly claimed his Cherokee identity in print and on stage—sometimes with dramatic misinformation (for example, early publicity materials erroneously stated that his father was an Indian chief, and he himself an alumnus of the famous Carlisle Indian School).[101] But Rogers's tribal culture was at odds with the plains Indian stereotypes perpetuated in western shows, and, in part because of this, audiences were ultimately unable to accept the fact that he was both a cowboy and an Indian—but this failure of recognition was not caused lack of effort on the performer's part.[102] Like Micheaux (who faced the challenge

---

99 Amy M. Ware, "Unexpected Cowboy, Unexpected Indian: The Case of Will Rogers." Ethnohistory 56.1 (2009): 1.

100 Ware, 10.

101 Ware, 13.

102 Deeply entrenched conflicts between settlers and Indians were painfully obvious to Rogers, whose family land was confiscated from the Cherokee tribe when Indian Territory was dissolved and the state of Oklahoma established in 1906 and 1907. His family bought their land back, but many of his fellow tribal members were not so fortunate—and were forced to watch non-Native settlers take over their property, establish new towns, and radically alter day-to-day life in the region. Ware, 10.

of creating compelling western rural African American characters despite the prevailing notion that western settlers were white), Rogers's creative work also placed an unexpected Indian body "in unexpected places during the early years of the twentieth century."[103] And like Micheaux, Rogers worked to bridge the boundaries between urban and rural people in his art.[104] What the very different work and reception of the two men shows is that rural interracial tension in the West was not confined to the realm of material conflict, but also played out in creative representations—in both their stories and their silences about race and identity.

Interracial tension was one of a number of factors that made homesteading on the Plains in Micheaux's time a significant challenge. Another factor was transportation. The lack of developed roads and the distance to railroad lines in Gregory and Tripp Counties meant that agricultural products had to be freighted on animal-drawn vehicles over difficult terrain, and then shipped via rail at exceedingly high rates—a real-life challenge that Micheaux addressed in his early fiction.[105] The proximity or distance of a railroad line made all the difference in the life of a rural plains community. John Hudson, writing about a neighboring county near Gregory and Tripp, noted that:

> the railroad completely determined the central place distribution of the county. It made immediate ghost towns of the erroneously located places anticipating the railroad, it created a splendid example of a boom town at the point of intersection, and it eventually made ghost towns out of all those places not on the railroad. At one time or another, Sanborn County had twenty-five places performing some

---

103 Ware, 2.

104 Ware, 15.

105 Micheaux's protagonist in The Conquest noted that the cost of shipping freight from Oristown, South Dakota to Omaha was double what it cost to ship the same goods from Chicago to Omaha. Micheaux, The Conquest, 84.

> type of central function, ranging from a lone post-office to a major trade center. Twenty of these are now ghost towns, and the other five are on the railroad.[106]

Micheaux's early novels reflected on the way uncertainty about transportation shaped rural communities:

> That was where the rub came in, which way would the road go? This became a source of continual worry and speculation on the part of the towns, and the men who felt inclined to put money into the towns by way of larger, better, and more commodious buildings; but when they were encouraged to do so, there was always the bogey "if." If the railroad should miss us, well, the man owning the big buildings was "stung," that was all, while the man with the shack could load it on two of four wagons, and with a few good horses, land his building in the town the railroad struck or started. This was, and is yet, one of the big reasons shacks are so numerous in a town in a new country, which expects a road but knows not which way it will come.[107]

Decisions about what and where to build were profoundly influenced by the presence and absence of roads and railroads in both The Homesteader and The Conquest—so much so that when the railroad track was laid to the town of Megory, many people in the nearby town of Calias (near where Micheaux's protagonists were farming) decided to physically move their buildings to the other townsite.[108]

An additional challenge Micheaux and the other settlers of his era faced was that much of the newly-available homesteading land in South Dakota was not well-suited for agriculture. The area was comparatively arid, with clayey soil, and regularly subject to grasshopper plagues, fall prairie fires, and prolonged droughts.[109] As a result, parcel sizes

---

106 Hudson, 451.

107 Micheaux, The Conquest, 85.

108 Micheaux, The Conquest, 98. Micheaux depicted the railroad engineers' decision to bypass Calais as comparable as the prairie fire that almost engulfs the town later on in both The Homesteader and The Conquest.

109 Hudson, 456. Hudson based many of his assertions on a source written shortly after the South Dakota settlement book: chapter seven of S. S. Visher's The Geography of South Dakota (Chicago: U of Chicago Libraries, 1918).

had to be much larger than those in the fertile crop lands of Iowa or Illinois for South Dakota farmers to reap comparable harvests; the limited productivity of the land was likely a surprise to Micheaux, who grew up on a farm near the Ohio River in Illinois with vastly different soil and topography. The first homesteaders in the area claimed the wooded lands, which followed creeks and ensured them a water supply for much of the year. The majority of the later claims (such as Micheaux's) were on prairie grasslands, which meant that dry farming—farming without irrigation—was the only option.[110] Settlers had to learn which crops would produce in their particular areas, and when and how they should be planted.[111] Fortunately, the diversity of the settlers who migrated to the region also meant a diversity of agricultural expertise, particularly from outside the United States. That same diversity also facilitated the development of transnational crops and farming practices that were documented in the modern agricultural journals of the era. The 1900 census noted that 22 percent of South Dakota's population had been born outside the United States, and 39 percent were of foreign parentage. The national origins diversity in the counties where Micheaux homesteaded was similar:

---

110 Later on in the century, the federal government would fund extensive irrigation projects in much of the West that would allow the region's farmers to compete with established agricultural lands in the rest of the country. Early on in The Conquest, Micheaux's protagonist noted the Minidoka canal project in Idaho, which "converted about a quarter of a million acres of Idaho's volcanic ash soil into productive lands that bloom as the rose," and contemplated moving there. Micheaux, The Conquest, 34.

111 Micheaux's protagonist in The Conquest, Oscar Devereaux, spoke to those unique farming conditions: "[t]he climatic condition is such that all kinds of crops grown in the central west, can be grown here. Two hundred miles north, corn will not mature; two hundred miles south, spring wheat is not grown; two hundred miles west, the altitude is too high to insure sufficient rainfall to produce a crop; but the reservation lands are in such a position that winter wheat, spring wheat, oats, rye, corn, flax,and barley do well. Ever since the drouth of '94, all crops had thrived, the rainfall being abundant, and continuing so during the first year of settlement." Micheaux, The Conquest, 83.

Table 4: 1910 European Immigrant Diversity in South Dakota

White persons born outside the country, in:	**Gregory County**	**Tripp County**
Wales	7	3
Scotland	9	10
Russia	710	118
Sweden	208	116
Switzerland	10	7
Turkey	3	3
Norway	103	59
Germany	443	231
Holland	23	17
Hungary	3	8
Ireland	23	38
Italy	2	3
France	2	3

Data Source: U.S. Census of Population, 1910

The immigrants' experiences of different topography, climates, and agricultural practices provided a practical knowledge base which helped South Dakota farmers learn about and adopt methods suitable for growing grains in their distinctive soil and climate, introduce wheat types from their home countries, and also establish livestock herds supported by new forage crops such as alfalfa and sorghum.[112]

Despite the diversity of the settlers in Gregory and Tripp Counties, there was extremely low population density (a little over eight people per square mile)—which meant chronic shortages in farm labor. Settlers in Micheaux's area who could afford to do so often experimented with expensive new labor-saving farm technologies such as reapers, binders, headers, and threshing machines, as well as different types of plows that

112 Phillips, 247. In The Conquest, Micheaux's narrator claimed that, although diverse, very few of his neighbors were farmers by trade, though sometimes novice energy and determination seemed more important than experience: "Only about one in every eight or ten was a farmer. They were of all vocations in life and all nationalities, excepting negroes, and I controlled the colored vote." Micheaux, The Conquest, 74.

would help them fight topsoil erosion.[113] Micheaux's early novels describe the difficulties of inexperienced farmers when clearing prairie land, and often went into great detail about farm equipment types and operation.[114] In The Homesteader, when facing a bumper crop, Micheaux's protagonist decided to use cutting-edge technology rather than brute force to harvest, and purchased a self-binding machine that he had admired in town.[115] Such agricultural machinery was viewed by many as a sign of rural modernity because of its large productive capacity. A self-binder was a significant improvement on earlier reapers because it not only cut the wheat, but also tied it into bales of uniform size using wire or twine. Pulled by a four-horse team, with cutting widths of six to eight feet, and a revolving paddle wheel, drapes, and a canvas conveyor belt, it was a challenging machine

---

113 For a description of each of these farm machines and how they operated, see "Early Wheat Harvesting in the Northwest," Ag Equipment Power (September 2001): 2. Accessed online 12/9/10. <http://www.agpowermag.com/articles/articles.php?articleid=1383>

114 For example, in The Conquest, Micheaux's protagonist, Oscar Devereaux, reflected at length about this issue: "I shall not soon forget my first effort to break prairie. There are different kinds of plows made for breaking the sod. Some kind that are good for one kind of soil cannot be used in another. In the gummy soils of the Dakotas, a long slant cut is the best. In fact, about the only kind that can be used successfully, while in the more sandy lands found in parts of Kansas and Nebraska, a kind is used which is called the square cut. The share being almost at right angles with the beam instead of slanting back from point to heel. Now in sandy soils this pulls mich easier for the grit scours off any roots, grass, or whatever else would hang over the share. To attempt to use this kind in wet, sticky land, such as was on my claim, would find the soil adhering to the plow share, causing it to drag, gather roots and grass, until it is impossible to keep the plow in the ground. When it is dry, this kind of plow can be used with success in the gummy land; but it was not dry when I invaded my homestead soil with my big horse, Jenny and Jack, that first day of May, but very wet indeed....As I faced the situation there seemed nothing to do but to fight it out." Devereaux later intercedes for a female neighbor whose sod is being plowed at the wrong depth by her hired hand—a mistake that could ruin her land. Micheaux, The Conquest, 68-69, 76.

115 "He had bought a new self-binder from Gregory which now stood in the yard ready for action, its various colors green, red, blue and white, resplendent in the sunlight." Micheaux, The Homesteader, 123.

to operate. But it significanlty reduced the number of people needed to work a field, and enabled a farmer to harvest up to 30 acres of wheat a day.[116]

Because drought was always a threat, prairie settlers in South Dakota often grew winter crops of wheat and other grains such as rye, barley, and oats—to take advantage of the winter rains and give their crops a chance to develop the strong root systems necessary to survive the spring heat, hot summer winds, insects, and disease.[117] If these autumn-sown crops could survive the winter cold and drought, then yields were plentiful. If not, then financial ruin was often the result.[118] Micheaux himself lost land to foreclosures in 1912, 1913, and 1914 because of drought—a fate shared by many of his neighbors. As Alan Trachtenberg demonstrated in The Incorporation of America, such rural problems were not only local in their origins; corporate financial interests were

---

116 These new technologies enabled a class of "suitcase farmers"—people who rented land that they lived and worked on for only two months out of the year—just long enough to plant and harvest a single crop. But most settlers were homesteaders like Micheaux, who had to live on their land for eight months out of the year for five consecutive years in order to "prove up" their claim and gain a clear title to the land from the federal government.

117 The protagonists in all three of Micheaux's homesteading novels grew winter wheat crops.

118 Micheaux made just such a catastrophic drought the centerpiece of the final section of The Homesteader. Although the local county commissioners in the novel had given settlers seed wheat and oats to help them after one dry year, the assistance was of no avail when the drought stretched on: "A local shower fell over part of the county in the last days of May, wetting the ground perhaps an inch deep, and then hot winds began with the first days of June. For thirty days following, not a drop of rain fell on the earth. The heat became so intense that breathing was made difficult, and when the fourth of July arrived, not a kernal of corn that had been planted that spring, had sprouted. The small grain crops had been burned to a crisp, and disaster hung over the land. Everywhere there was a panic. From the West, people who had gone there three and four years before were returning panic stricken; the stock they were driving—when they drove—were hollow and gaunt and thin. Going hither the years before they had presented the type of aggressive pioneers. But now they were returning a tired, gaunt, defeated army." Micheaux, The Homesteader, 398.

profoundly interconnected with rural landownership and agricultural production.[119] Eastern speculators had driven up the cost of land in South Dakota, and bankers routinely set high mortgage interest rates and strict repayment terms—all of which exascerbated the financial strain of the drought years. In the face of this, Micheaux decided that farming in South Dakota was, for him, a losing proposition. In order to support himself, he turned from farming to fiction writing, and then, in 1918, to filmmaking.[120]

PENS AND PLOUGHSHARES

Micheaux wrote and published his first novel, The Homesteader, in 1913, while he was still struggling to save the last of his land from foreclosure. It might seem counter-intuitive that a novice author could successfully market a novel to fellow farmers on the drought-stricken South Dakota plains, but Micheaux knew his rural audience and their powerful desire for entertaining reading material. When the Western Book Company (the Lincoln, Nebraska printer Micheaux hired to print his book) demanded a $250 pre-payment, Micheaux went door-to-door and sold 1,500 subscription copies of The Conquest at $1.50 apiece—which meant a profit for him of $1,125.[121]

Subscription book sales through catalogs and individual salespeople were not uncommon in the rural plains states, despite the fact that the practice was held by many in

---

119 Alan Trachtenberg, The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).

120 Bowser and Spence, 9.

121 McGilligan, 76–77. When Kingsbury County homesteader Eliza Jane Wilder (the future sister-in-law of novelist Laura Ingalls Wilder) bought a 1,000 mile train ticket to sell book subscriptions in prairie towns during the winter of 1883, she netted $100 in a month—which she considered a tidy profit, and an important supplement to her schoolteacher salary, the $30 she previously had in savings, and the scanty supply of food (and non-existent supply of fuel) she had laid in at her claim. Lisa Lindell, "Bringing Books to a 'Book-Hungry Land': Print Culture on the Dakota Prairie." Book History 7 (2004): 219-20.

the Progresive Era to be modern and lowbrow. A typical exponent of this view was T. A. Crisman, a school superintendent in Spink County, South Dakota, who wrote:

> What books will you find [in the country homes]? The Bible, nearly always. Usually an almanac advertising some patent medicine, with a few witty sayings thrown in as bait. A book or two bought from an agent, just to get rid of her....What a grand opportunity there is for the cultivation of literary taste in most of our country homes![122]

Micheaux's rural readers were less scrupulous about the boundaries of high and popular culture, in part because reading materials were so scarce on the Dakota prairie.[123] Although local newspapers proliferated in South Dakota during the settlement era, most of these publications were business-oriented, and sprung up mainly to help homesteaders

---

122 Lindell, 230. Amy Thomas noted that the paucity of scholarship on American subscription book sales in the 18th and 19th century make it difficult to make reasonable claims about the gender, social class, and aspirations of the "typical" book salesperson in any given period or region. This despite the fact that "hundreds of thousands of subscription books were produced in the nineteenth century, and even though this method of bookselling was so successful that traditional booksellers feared they could not compete, not a single monograph has been written about the history of the subscription book trade. Marjorie Stafford's 1943 master's thesis is the closest thing to an in-depth overview of subscription publishing from its beginnings in the sixteenth century to the early twentieth century." Amy M. Thomas, "'There is Nothing so Effective as a Personal Canvass': Revaluaing Nineteenth-Century American Subscription Books." Book History 1 (1998): 141. The current state of scholarship on this topic is still much as Thomas described it in 1998.

123 In 1912, the newly-formed South Dakota Library Association estimated that 80 percent of the state's residents had no access to a public library; local school library collections were spartan and did not circulate; promoted travelling rural libraries. Citing the Hand County Inventory and Appraisement Records, 1891-1906 (State Archives, South Dakota State Historical Society, Pierre), Lisa Lindell noted that "[i]nformation on the number of books, along with other articles of personal property, owned by early settlers of Hand County, South Dakota, is available from probated estate inventories. Of the few inventories that mentionned books (22 out of 210 households), around two-thirds (68 percent) had a Bible; nearly as many (64 percent) had one or more schoolbooks; and 50 percent owned other books, none exceeding a combined value of $10. Individual book titles were not listed, with the exception of a single mention of Webster's Dictionary, appraised at thirty cents." Lindell, 224-233.

meet the legal requirements of gaining land title (which included publishing five consecutive notices of an individual's intention to gain title in the local newspaper). Lisa Lindell, in her study of Dakota prairie print culture, noted that:

> [p]roof notices and ready-printed material, rather than substantive news or literary matter, formed the primary content of many of these early newspapers. These papers tended to be transitory as well, going out of business or moving on as regions became settled. Other ready sources of reading material remained in short supply throughout the late nineteenth century and well into the twentieth.[124]

In addition to using these local papers to make land claims, settlers also used them for more workaday purposes: for window curtains, and to stuff the chinks in sod house walls to help keep out the snow.[125] But what rural readers really craved, if requests to the travelling lending libraries established by the newly-formed South Dakota Library Association in 1913 are an indicator, was fiction. Although the lending libraries also carried nonfiction, children's books, and special agricultural collections, fiction was by far the most popular with rural patrons, and librarians struggled to keep up with the demand.[126] One satisfied library patron noted that "[t]he winter months are very long and reading is about the only enjoyment that people can get out here." Another settler, whose homestead in Pennington County hosted the travelling library collection, wrote that "[p]erhaps only a pioneer in this vast portion of the west can so fully appreciate the value

---

124 Lindell, 218.

125 Lindell, 218.

126 One important type of reading material that the lending libraries did not carry were magazines. Brunn and Raitz noted that farming magazines, which were the most popular with rural readers, tended to be region-specific in their circulation because of the advice the offered: "In 1880, 63 of the 157 total farm magazines published in the country were published in the Midwest states. The proportion increased to 194 of the 445 published in 1925." ("Midwest" includes MN, IA, WI, MI, OH, IN, IL, and MO). As a result, farmers on the plains in the early 1900s had fewer viable farm magazine choices. Stanley D. Brunn and Karl B. Raitz. "Regional Patterns of Farm Magazine Publication." Economic Geography 54. 4 (Oct., 1978): 281.

of even one book."[127] Micheaux's rural protagonists in his early homesteading novels agreed—they loaned books to their neighbors, and talked about the importance of reading materials, particularly during the winter months when cold weather precluded most agricultural work.[128]

The advice that book subscription firms typically gave their salespeople during this era was that it was essential to memorize all the book descriptions on their sales lists, and be able to talk about the titles fluently—so that the booksellers did not sound rote or rehearsed. Micheaux, as the author of the books he sold, had an obvious advantage in knowing his product. But despite what the Spink County Superintendant believed about the good-natured farmer willing to buy a book just to get rid of a zealous salesperson, rural bookselling was far from a sure thing. Although advertised as a suitable occupation for disabled soldiers, aged clergymen, invalids, and others who could not do hard manual work, rural book sales typically involved extensive, uncomfortable travel in inclement weather—sometimes by train, and often by cart or on foot on unpaved country roads. Because of such difficulties, many individuals' careers as booksellers were extremely short-lived. Ole Rølvaag, who sold subscription books in 1899 and 1900 near Canton, South Dakota (and, like Micheaux, would go on to write novels based on his homesteading experiences) later told his students at St. Olaf College that "no-one was

---

127The South Dakota Library Association launched 100 travelling libraries in the first two years of the program (1913-1914), each of which loaned books out for 6 month terms. By 1920, the program had 251 travelling libraries and a long wait-list of communities eager to join and pay the book transportation costs (three of the established travelling libraries were in Gregory County, and five were in Tripp County). Lindell, 228-31.

128 Oscar Devereaux, Micheaux's hero in The Conquest, noted that "I was always a lover of success and nothing interested me more after a day's work in the field than spending my evening hours in reading." Micheaux, The Conquest, 175.

truly educated who had not tried to sell books or aluminum-ware."[129] That Micheaux would succeed with his first novel, and then go on to self-publish and sell two more novels in the next four years (as well as sell stock in his newly-formed book company), speaks both to his tenacity and to his deep knowledge of the rural bookbuying audience.

Micheaux's success marketing his work to rural readers is even more impressive given that his novels were a far cry from the typical fiction requested by rural South Dakota readers—who seem to have favored uplifting books about plucky white heroines living in cities.[130] Micheaux's first novel featured a black anti-heroine whose passivity, attachment to city life, and conspicuous consumption profoundly damaged her husband's chances of homesteading success. The novel was mainly set on the rural plains (not in a glamorous cosmopolitan locale), dealt with the workaday concerns of farmers, and did not have a happy ending—despite his protagonist's strong work ethic and determination to disprove the pervasive stereotypes about black inferiority. What the fictional Oscar Devereaux did share with his rural readers, though, was an appreciation for a "good story with a moral."[131] Although the plucky heroine never arrived in The Conquest, Devereaux

---

129 Lindell, 223-224.

130 At this time, the most popular novels in the South Dakota lending library were The White Linen Nurse (1913) by Eleanor Hallowell Abbott (about Rae Malgregor, a recent nursing school graduate who questions her commitment to her new profession), and Romance of Billy-Goat Hill (1912) by Alice Hegan Rice (which opens on the porch of a grand old Kentucky plantation mansion "that now stood like the last remaining fortress against the city's invasion" with the Colonel Bob Carsey III rebuking "his nigger" Jimpson for failing to bring the ice for his mint julep promptly at 2:00 p.m).

131 Like Micheaux's early rural white readers, his black film audiences in the 1920s appreciated stories with morals. As Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence noted, "early Race movies were often discussed in terms of their edifying values....Motion pictures were seen by many as a tool for building people's awareness, a force for social betterment, and ought...to make a strong moral statement." One of those morals was the importance of black uplift, and Micheaux made it plain that he saw his movies as forces for social change. "Moving pictures have become one of the greatest vitalizing forces in

noted his appreciation for the stories of popular author Maude Radford Warren (whose work celebrated modern, virtuous, independent women), and by so doing simultaneously identified with his readers' tastes and educated them about what to value in literature:

> I enjoyed reading stories by Maude Radford Warren, largely because her stories were so very practical and true to life. Having traveled and seen much of the country, while running as a porter for the P--------n Company, I could follow much of her writings, having been over the ground covered by the scenes of many of her stories. Another feature of her writing which pleased me was the fact that many of the characters, unlike the central figures in many stories, who all became fabulously wealthy, were often only fairly successful and gained only a measure of wealth and happiness, that did not reach prohibitive proportions.[132]

Devereaux's praise of realistic settings and plot resolution in Warren's fiction also raised the bar for Micheaux's representations of rural life since the majority of his audience for

---

race adjustment," he wrote in the January-February 1921 issue of the Competitor, "and we are just beginning." Bowser and Spence, 88-89. Micheaux's commitment to making films with strong moral contend did not preclude his depictions of shocking material, which often landed him in trouble with film censors. On September 28th of 1922, the State of New York's Motion Picture Commission wrote a letter to the Micheaux Film Corporation informing them that their movie The Homesteader had been rejected by the censors a second time. The problem was that the film's director, Oscar Micheaux, had failed to eliminate scenes on two reels that depicted domestic violence and referenced "prevention" (i.e. abortifacients). The censors claimed that the film was "immoral" and would "tend to incite crime," both violations under Section 5 of Chapter 715 of the censorship law of 1921. The film could not be approved for public viewing in its current state, but was not a lost cause; the censors again asked Micheaux to edit his film, and promised to certify it if their terms were met. New York State Archives, Series A1418 MPD.

132 Micheaux, The Conquest, 175. By the time Micheaux mentioned her in The Conquest in 1913, Warren had published two novels (The Land Of The Living and Peter, Peter), numerous nonfiction articles (including a 1911 series on a woman pioneer), and at least eight short stories in such national magazines as Harper's Monthly, The Saturday Evening Post and Ladies Home Journal. Warren wrote about women who succeeded because of their modern outlook, and women who failed and were miserable because of their outmoded ideas of romance and dependency on men. Micheaux's praise of Warren suggests the possibility that The Conquest might be read not only as a stylistic mirror of Warren's realism of setting and plot, but also as an example of the negative outcomes for the men who marry old-fashioned women.

this first novel were farmers on the Great Plains, and would know whether the book accurately captured the nuances of homesteading life.[133]

Micheaux's canniness as a salesperson would become widely known in the black community in the 1920s as a result of his widespread and often sensational film publicity.[134] But the artist did more than cut his proverbial marketing teeth on rural subject matter and audiences in the early 1900s. While many other writers and filmmakers were focused on the growth of urban populations and publishing

---

133 The comments about Warren reinforced the moral about accuracy in print suggested by an earlier anecdote about romanticized newspaper portraits of the West. In chapter twelve of in The Conquest, Devereaux recounts this story about the misrepresentation of his neighbor: "Those who have always lived in the older settled parts of the country sometimes have exaggerated ideas of life on the homestead, and the following incident offers a partial explanation. Megory and Calias each had a newspaper, and when they weren't roasting each other and claiming their paper to be the only live and progressive organ in the country, they were 'building' railroads or printing romantic tales about brave homesteader girls. A little red-headed girl nicknamed 'Jack' owned a claim near Calias. One day it was reported that she killed a rattlesnake in her house. The report of the great encounter reached eastern dailies, and was published as a Sunday feature story in one of the leading Omaha papers. It was accompanied by gorgeous pictures of the girl in a leather skirt, riding boots, and cowboy hat, entering a sod house, and before her, coiled and poised to strike, lay a monster rattlesnake. Turning on her heel and jerking the bridle from her horse's head, she made a terrific swing at Mr. Rattlesnake, and he, of course, 'met his Waterloo.' This, so the story read, was the eightieth rattlesnake she had killed. She was described as 'rattlesnake Jack' and thereafter went by that name. She was also credited with having spent the previous winter alone on her claim and rather enjoyed the wintery nights and snow blockade. Now as a matter of fact, she had spent most of the previous winter enjoying the comforts of a front room at the Hotel Calias, going to the claim occasionally on nice days. She had no horse, and as to the eighty rattlesnakes, seventy-nine were myths, existing only in the mind of a prolific feature story writer for the Sunday edition of the great dailies. In fact she had killed one small young rattler with a button." Micheaux, The Conquest, 76-77.

134 For examples, see Charlene Regester's discussion of Micheaux's film publicity for Thirty Years Later and his film adaptation of The House Behind the Cedars in "Headline to Headlights: Oscar Micheaux's Exploitation of the Rhinelander Case." The Western Journal of Black Studies 22. 3 (1998): 195-204.

opportunities, Micheaux continued to market his films to rural (as well as urban) audiences through urban publications with wide rural circulations (such as the Chicago Defender and the New York Age), as well as via the print publicity circulated by the movie theaters that played his films.[135] Always conscious of the bottom line, Micheaux continued to take advantage of the low costs of working in the countryside, and frequently filmed on location in rural South Dakota rather than in Chicago or New York (the cities where his film company was based in the 1920s). Nor would Micheaux abandon rural settings and themes when he switched from writing novels to making films. His first feature film, The Homesteader, was a film adaptation of his eponymous pioneer novel, and two of his three extant films circulated in the 1920s (Within Our Gates and Symbol of the Unconquered) were set at least in part in the rural West and South, and dealt with the challenges facing African American protagonists in each locale.[136]

In the absence of prints of most of Micheaux's early films, scholars have relied heavily on both Micheaux's publicity materials and period film reviews, but these sources are often thematically limited and misleading. Micheaux's film publicity focused attention on racy, violent, or news-related themes, and tended to minimize his recurring

---

135 Micheaux was hands-on regarding local publicity for his films, often stipulating advertising specifics in his film rental contracts with theaters, and going so far as to order half-price paper for the Douglass Theatre manager in Machon to use in printing his film posters and handbills. "September 30, 1927 letter from Oscar Micheaux to William M. Smith, Macon, Georgia." Charles Henry Douglass business records, Middle Georgia Archives (box: 19, folder: 173, item: 17).

136 Micheaux's 1922 film Virgin of the Seminole was also set in a rural locale (and featured a black protagonist who becomes a Canadian Mounted Policeman and later a successful rancher), as was his 1924 film Birthright—a remake of T.S. Stribling's 1922 novel about the racial barriers to African American education in the rural South. (Although Micheaux remade Birthright in 1939, the original print of the film is lost—so scholars have relied on film publicity and newspaper reviews from 1924-5 to determine the degree to which Micheaux adhered to the novel's setting, plot, and subplots).

focus on black rural education, western settlement, and land ownership; period film reviews tended to follow suit. For example, Within Our Gates (which was considered lost until a single print was discovered in Spain in the 1970s and then restored by the Library of Congress in 1993) is typically praised by scholars for its bold treatment of lynching, miscegenation, and sexual violence—the same sensational themes on which Micheaux's publicity for the film focused. Much of the film's contemporary press coverage also overlooked the importance of education, a typical example being the Chicago Defender's article about the film's opening:

> [I]t is withal the biggest protest against Race prejudice, lynching and "concubinage" that was ever written or filmed....[t]he scenes are laid in the South where the outrages are the most predominant, and the author has not minced words in presenting the facts as they really exist.[137]

Charlene Regester's study of Micheaux's film publicity for the 1927 film adaptation of Charles Chesnutt's The House Behind the Cedars detailed how Micheaux repeatedly emphasized the similarities between his film and the sensational real-life Rhinelander divorce case—a story that was extensively covered in the black press—despite the fact that the Rhinelander case and the Chesnutt plot were in fact quite different.[138] Subsequent scholars have mainly used Regester's work to talk about Micheaux and entrepreneurship rather than capitalize on the springboard it provides into the issue of thematic misdirection in the lost films. The result of this focus on a narrow range of publicity materials has been a critical erasure of rural themes, and the mischaracterization of Micheaux as an urban artist exclusively interested in urban subjects and audiences. My work corrects these two interpretive mistakes, and additionally argues that Micheaux's

---

137 Chicago Defender, January 10, 1920. Micheaux's film was to play for a week at Hammond's Vendomme Theater beginning on Monday, January 12th.

138 Regester, "Headlines to Highlights," 195-204.

film aesthetics were profoundly shaped by rural cultural practices and norms. Indeed, rural aesthetics are the lynchpin that enables a coherent account of Micheaux's formal cinematic choices. Marshalling a more diverse body of evidence and placing those historical sources in context are both necessary to make sense of Micheaux's portrayal and critique of rural life on the big screen in the 1920s.

BIG SCREENS, SMALL CITIES

Contemporaneous with Micheaux's shift from fiction to film was a shift in his audience from predominantly white to predominantly black.[139] As Micheaux noted in a publicity letter for his film version of The Homesteader, "Negro Productions such as this are restricted as it were to Negro Theaters, and cannot be booked through regular exchanges on the usual basis."[140] Billboard magazine's 1921 state-by-state tally identified 178 colored movie theaters in the United States; business correspondence from one of Micheaux's competitors, the Norman Film Manufacturing Company, noted that same year that their films had "a possible distribution in about 120 theatres; 85% of which have an average seating capacity of but 250."[141] Micheaux's film debuts were always in big northern cities. But the majority of blacks were southern and rural in the early 1920s, and Micheaux's films played extensively in southern cities,[142] sometimes in posh black-run

139 Although Micheaux had hoped to broaden his audience when he moved to film, he was forced to accept the limitations for "race movies" in the 1920s—which played mainly to black audiences and in segregated theaters.

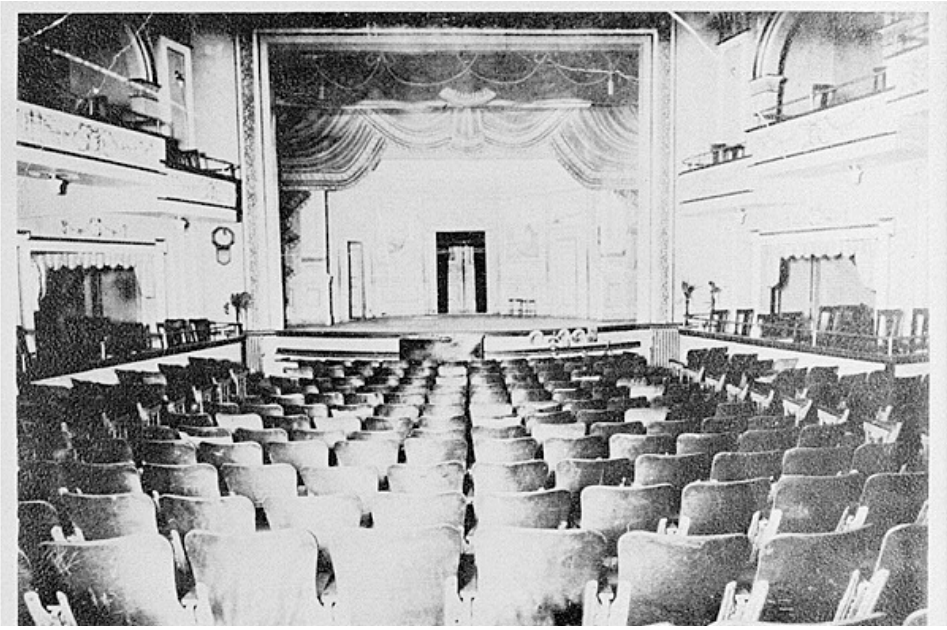
140 Open letter to exhibitors, March 1919, Johnson Collection, UCLA. Cited in Bowser and Spence, 117.

141 Bowser and Spence, 114-115.

142 Bowser and Spence noted that "five of the nine prints of The Brute were 'working' in the South two months after the film's debut." Bowser and Spence, 230 (footnote 70).

venues such as the Douglass Theatre in Macon, Georgia (population 52,995) managed by Charles H. Douglass:[143]

Figure 10. Douglass Theatre, Macon, Georgia.



A closer look at the smaller southern cities that showed Micheaux's films demonstrates that they differed profoundly based on size, composition, and context, and were in many ways unlike the major metropolitan centers focused on by most contemporary scholarship on race and early cinema.[144] Many of these small cities had a decidedly rural character, and reflected the rural counties in which they were located.

---

143 Photograph of interior of Douglass Theatre, Macon, Bibb County, Georgia (Image id: bib-158). Vanishing Georgia, Georgia Division of Archives and History, Office of Secretary of State. Accessed 12/31/10. <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/cgi/vanga?query=id%3Abib157&_cc=1&Welcome&Welcome>

144 The three book-length studies that make race central to their examination of African American movie-going in the twentieth century all focus on big city venues. Janna Jones's 2003 The Southern Movie Palace: Rise, Fall, and Resurrection detailed the restoration of movie theaters in Atlanta (population 200,616 in 1920), Biloxi, Birmingham (population 178,806), Durham (population 21,719), Memphis (population

In the 1929 program for "Negro Farm and Home Ownership Week," sponsored by the Association for the Advancement of Negro Country Life, George Gordon Battle noted that movie-going was an important part of modern rural life:

> [m]odern inventions have bestowed a vast number of improvements and comforts to those who dwell in the country. Good roads, the telephone, the radio, the moving picture shows and many other new institutions have made life in the country more interesting and stimulating.[145]

Rural access to Micheaux's films seems to have been firmly established at the beginning of the 1920s—at least in the American South. Although the Micheaux Film Company had a policy not to exhibit in churches, their stock offering of 1921 made it clear that they did show their films at schools and YMCAs—which made it possible for them to exhibit in communities too small to have a movie theater for black patrons (or, indeed, any theater at all). Most of the Micheaux Film Corporation records are no longer extant, but a surviving letter from Swan Micheaux (Oscar's brother and business partner) to George P. Johnson (a fellow filmmaker and distributor) detailed exactly where Within Our Gates was booked for the first three months of 1920; following is a summary:[146]

Table 5. Within Our Gates Circulation, January-March, 1920.

162,351), and Tampa (population 51,608). Jacqueline Stewart's Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity (2005) focused on moviegoing in Chicago—the second largest city in America in 1920 (population 2,701,705). Gregory A. Waller's 1995 Main Street Amusements: Movies and Commercial Entertainment in a Southern City, 1896-1930 studied Lexington, Kentucky (population 54,664).

145 Benjamin F. Hubert, ed., "Negro Farm and Home Ownership Week." Association for the Advancement of Negro Country Life, Georgia State Industrial College, 1929. Library of Congress. Harmon Foundation Archives; William E. Harmon Awards for Distinguished Achievement Among Negroes." Award category: "Farming and Rural Life." Applicant file: Louis Henderson Martin.

146 10/27/20 Swan Micheaux letter to George P. Johnson. George P. Johnson Negro Film Collection (Collection 1042). Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

Date(s) of 1920 showings	Theater Name	Theater Location / City Population	County Name / Population	County Rural Population %
1/20	Rex Theatre	Durham, NC / 21,719	Durham / 42,219	48.6%
1/21	n/a	Reidsville, NC / 5,333	Rockingham / 44,149	87.9%
1/21-22	Auditorium Theater	Atlanta, GA / 200,616	Dekalb & Fulton / 276,657	21%
1/21-22	Atlas Theatre	Spartanburg, SC / 22,638	Spartanburg / 94,265	76%
1/23-24	Community Center	Charlotte, NC / 46,338	Mecklenburg / 80,695	42.6%
1/27-28	Star Theatre	Asheville, NC / 28,504	Buncombe / 64,148	55.6%
1/29	Dixie Theatre	Greenwood, SC / 8,703	Greenwood / 35,791	75.7%
1/30-31	Lincoln Theatre	Columbia, SC / 37,524	Richland / 78,122	48.7%
2/3	Palmetto Theatre	Orangeburg, SC / 7,290	Orangeburg / 64,907	88.8%
2/4	Globe Theatre	Wilson, NC / 10,612	Wilson / 36,813	71.2%
2/6	Rex Theatre	Goldsboro, NC / 11,296	Wayne / 43,640	74.1%
2/9	Globe Theatre	New Bern, NC / 12,198	Craven / 29,048	58%
2/10	Victoria Theatre	Washington, NC / 6,314	Beaufort / 31,024	79.6%
2/11	Palace Theatre	Kinston, NC / 9,771	Lenoir / 29,555	66.9%
2/17-18	Pekin Theatre	Brunswick, GA / 14,413	Glynn / 19,370	25.6%
2/20	Crystal Theatre	Dublin, GA / 7,707	Laurens / 39,605	80.5%
2/23-24	Dixie Theatre	Sandersville, GA / 2,695	Washington / 28,147	90.4%
2/26	Lennox Theatre	Augusta, GA / 52,548	Richmond / 63,692	17.5%
2/28	81 Theatre	Atlanta, GA / 200,616	Dekalb & Fulton / 276,657	21%
3/1	Morton Star Theatre	Athens, GA / 16,748	Clarke / 26,111	35.9%
3/2	Douglass Theatre #2	Macon, GA / 52,995	Bibb / 71,304	25.7%
3/12	Liberty Theatre	Greenville, SC / 23,127	Greenville / 88,498	73.9%
3/14	Dream Theatre	Columbus, GA / 31,125	Muscogee / 44,195	29.6%
3/15	Gem Theatre	Fort Valley, GA / 3,223	Houston / 21,964	85.3%
3/16	Elite Theatre	Cordele, GA / 6,538	Crisp / 18,914	65.4%
3/17	Opera House	Americus, GA / 9,010	Sumter / 29,640	69.6%
3/19-20	Star Theatre	Waycross, GA / 18,068	Ware / 28,361	36.3%

!

Within Our Gates played in Sandersville, Georgia (population 2,695) as well as Atlanta (population 200,616); predictably, the big city had a much greater box office net ($150 from a one-day film rental, compared to the $35.90 Sandersville netted in two days).[147] Sandersville was the smallest southern city to show Within Our Gates at the beginning of 1920, but it was by no means the only small city on the film's distribution list. Reidsville, North Carolina (population 5,333) appears to have been too small to have a movie theater in 1920. Greenwood, South Carolina (population 8,703); Orangeburg, South Carolina (population 7,290); Washington, North Carolina (population 6,314); Dublin, Georgia (7,707); Fort Valley, Georgia (population 3,223); Cordele, Georgia (population 6,538); and Americus, Georgia (population 9,010) all had theaters of some kind, but were relatively small cities nestled in predominantly rural agricultural counties.[148]

The 1920 Census Office statistics (which defined "rural" as open countryside and any place with fewer than 2,500 people) make the division between urban and rural communities seem clear-cut, but examination of people's lived experiences reveals the profound interconnection between black rural and urban life in the period, and the decidedly rural character of many places categorized as urban. According to the basic population density measures used by the Census Office in the 1920s, large temporary backwoods lumber or mining camps without any municipal services or infrastructure

---

147 Swan Micheaux letter to George P. Johnson, 27 October 1920. George P. Johnson Negro Film Collection (Collection 1042). Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

148 The range of venues in which Micheaux's film played during these months was hardly unique. Catherine E. Kerr noted that, starting in 1907, both of the important film trade papers—Moving Picture World and the New York Dramatic Mirror—ran frequent letters from rural exhibitors. Kerr's, Robert Allen's, and Douglas Gomery's work on early film audiences correct earlier film historiography that pigeonholed silent movies as a primarily urban entertainment form patronized by European immigrants. Kerr, 385.

would simply be considered urban, as would city dwellers who relied on seasonal agricultural employment in the countryside to pay their bills. Domestics who worked full-time in town but lived on outlying farms with their families would be considered rural, as would farmers who commuted into cities on a daily or weekly basis to sell their produce. These are the types of economic relationships that were pervasive in the near-rural South during the 1920s, and in many of the communities that viewed Micheaux's films.[149] What these urban-rural connections mean is that, rather than "migrating to the movies," as had African American film audiences in 1920s Chicago,[150] much of Micheaux's rural audience could simply make a short drive into town in a car or animal-drawn wagon, see a film, and be back home on the farm before sunset; his audience did not have to be urban to participate in the new black moviegoing culture of the early twentieth century. Popular race movie distributors rarely travelled deep into the rural hinterlands to project their films onto the sides of barns, as did African American extension workers from black agruicultural schools with their instructional films on animal husbandry, crop rotation,

---

149 The 1920 Census Office definition, based on land use patterns and administrative boundaries (municipalities and counties), has since been augmented by socioeconomic measures that evaluate the percentage of the employed population that commutes to and from core counties, and finer-grained labor market definitions that measure "urban" and "rural" at the census tract level (rather than the larger county-level). All three types of measures (administrative, land use, and economic) are currently used and accepted by the U.S. Government. A rural economic studies publication of the United States Department of Agriculture and the Economic Research Service summarized the situation best: "The use of different definitions of rural by Federal agencies reflects the multidimensional qualities of rural America. The share of the U.S. population considered rural ranges from 17 to 49 percent depending on the definition used." John Cromartie and Shawn Bucholtz, "Defining the 'Rural' in Rural America." Amber Waves, June 2008. Retrieved September 9, 2010 from: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/AmberWaves/June08/Features/RuralAmerica.htm>

150 Jacqueline Stewart, Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity (Berkeley: U of California P, 2005).

natural fertilizers, modern outhouse construction, food preservation, and other topics. (Micheaux's contemporary, Langston Hughes, witnessed just such a portable-generator-powered rural film screening when he travelled on Tuskegee's rural demonstration truck in the summer of 1927).[151] But popular race movie makers did circulate their films in such a way that made them accessible to a large rural audience, as well as to black urbanites who were georgraphically, functionally, and culturally connected to farm life and rural concerns.[152]

FORT VALLEY: PORTRAIT OF AN AUDIENCE

The complexity of urban-rural connections in the small southern cities where Micheaux's film was shown in 1920 is well illustrated by Fort Valley, Georgia. Fort

---

151 Arnold Rampersad, The Life of Langston Hughes Vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002): 152.

152 Inspired by Tuskegee's creation and use of films in extension work, numerous other extension programs floowed suit and purchased their own projectors and portable generators for rural film screenings—despite the considerable expense this entailed. For example, when the women's extension group from Charleston County, South Carolina won a $1,000 Model Farm Award from the Harmon Foundation in 1926, the home demonstration agent reported that they spent half of the award money on "a moving piciture projector." Harmon Foundation, Inc. Records, Library of Congress (Box 18; "Award Program" series 1926-7; folder title "Harmon Awards Model Farms"). Because the cost a projector was roughly the same as the annual salary paid to a black home demonstration worker, many of the 1920s film equipment purchases were funded by awards and grants from white philanthropies rather than the typically cash-strapped local extension programs themselves. Commerical concerns, such as the North Carolina Negro State Fair, also made films for rural audiences in an attempt to attract them to the fair. The management showed these publicity films for free, "in all parts of the state," and focused on things that would be of interest to farmers: "agricultural exhibits, parades, auto show, stock, motorcycle races, as well as practical demonstrations in domestic science and household industry." Bowser and Spence, 105. Government agencies, such as the Children's Bureau (part of the Department of Labor) made its lantern slides, silent films, and "talkies" available to rural women through clubs and extension offices. Marilyn Irvin Holt, Linoleum, Better Babies, and the Modern Farm Woman, 1890-1930. (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1995): 111.

Valley was a city with prosperity linked to agriculture; the county in which it was located produced nearly $3 million worth of fruit and nuts in 1920 (approximately a quarter of the state's fruit and nut crops).[153] Situated in Georgia's fertile Black Belt, and surrounded by farm land and pine forests, Fort Valley was an important shipping hub for the region's cotton, asparagus, pecans, and peach crops.[154] The city boasted two movie theaters when Micheaux's film came to town: the Austin Theatre (on Main Street), and the Gem Theatre (about one block away, on Church Street). The Austin Theatre was located in a former dry goods store, which was remodeled in 1916 by George H. Slappey, a local pharmacist who would later become a successful peach farmer. Slappey added a second floor auditorium and then opened his theater in 1917 with a play called "Peg O' My Heart," performed by a travelling theater company; he intended his theater to have "the sumptuousness of a palace, the convenience of a house and the agreeableness of a county seat."[155] The Austin Theatre was one of the grandest buildings downtown. By contrast, the Gem Theatre—where Micheaux's film played—was off the main street, and shared its iron-clad wood building with a drug store, a tin shop, and a shoe shop; the theater

153 $2,893,605 according to the 1920 Census.

154 Fort Valley's city government website highlights the importance of agriculture in local history: "According to local peach grower Bill McGeehee (Big 6 Packing Company), and local historian Wallis Hardeman, the 17,200 railroad cars were the equivalent to about 9,000 truckloads of peaches (one railroad car averaged 400 bushels of peaches). Today growers ship approximately 1,500 to 2,000 truck loads of peaches per year." Accessed January 18, 2010. <http://www.fortvalleyusa.com/history.cfm>

155 "The Austin Theatre," Downtown Development Authority of Fort Valley. The theater briefly served as the county courthouse in 1925 after Fort Valley became the county seat of the newly-created Peach County. Accessed January 4, 2011 <http://www.fortvalleymainstreet.org/austintheatre.cfm.>

faced a large privately-owned garage that was used to store tractors, wagons, and harnesses, and also had a stable of animals for sale.[156]

Although the rural population was on the decline in many farming areas of the United States, agricultural productivity and identity was on the ascent in Fort Valley, as the businesses in its downtown indicate. In a few years, the small city would become the county seat of the newly-created Peach County (named, of course, after the region's most famous crop); the Atlantic Ice and Coal Company would spend a million dollars to build the largest ice plant in the world downtown because so much ice was needed to cool produce-filled railroad cars shipping out of the local train station; and the Fort Valley High and Industrial School on the edge of town would continue to expand its curriculum and outreach programs, becoming arguably the most influential black agricultural college in the state. Agricultural school communities such as Fort Valley, Georgia and Orangeburg, South Carolina[157] would likely have been enthusiastic about Micheaux's Within Our Gates because its plot focused on black rural education: a school in the rural South struggling to survive in the face of local racism and declining northern philanthropy. Micheaux's 1924 film adaptation of T. S. Stribling's Birthright would also

---

156 The theater was so small that the Sanborn fire insurance map surveyor did not bother to list the Gem Theater's name on his 1920 map, but simply listed the business type as "moving pictures." This practice was not uncommon, as only the major businesses in a town or city were labeled and indexed with proper names; frequently, poor and African American residential areas were not surveyed at all, as they were of little interest to the insurance company. The Austin Theatre was also mislabeled as the "Franklin Theatre." Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps for Georgia Towns and Cities, 1884-1922. Sanborn Maps, Fort Valley, Georgia, 1920, Maps 4 and 5. University of Georgia Libraries Map Collection.

157 Orangeburg was home to South Carolina State College, a black land-grant institution founded in 1896, with an active farm and home demonstration program for black farmers in the 1920s.

have had this same thematic appeal in the rural and near-rural South.[158] In contrast to Within Our Gates, in which the southern Piney Woods School succeeds in its fundraising campaign, the protagonist's attempt to set up a rural school in Birthright was a dismal failure. But both films explored the complexities of rural education and interracial cooperation in ways that would have been appealing to audiences wrestling with these same issues in their day-to-day lives.

Mid-May through Mid-August was peach and cotton harvest season in Georgia, and fruit- and cotton-laden trains on the "Dixie Flyer" and "Flamingo" rail lines (which ran from Chicago and Detroit to Key West) pulled out of the segregated Fort Valley Station around the clock during those months, taking local agricultural products to market. (In the summer of 1920, the Fort Valley train station shipped out over 17,000 train cars full of peaches; each car carried approximately 400 bushels). But even outside the extremely busy harvest season, it was clear that the city was built on agriculture. Grocery stores, banks, garages, two hotels, the dime store, the Chinese laundry, the Ford dealership, and dry goods and retail clothing shops were interspersed with the types of businesses that were only found in agricultural areas: fruit packing warehouses, fruit growers supply wareshouses, fertilizer plants, a cotton gin, a cotton seed oil mill, and the offices of the Desciduous Fruit Inspectors of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Bureau of Entomology.[159]

---

158 Stribling's novel (and the film based on it) focused on Peter Siner, a mulatto, who, at the story's opening, is returning to his small home town of Hooker's Bend, Tennessee, after earning a degree from Harvard. Siner attempts to put his education to work by starting a school for local blacks, but is repeatedly thwarted by the profound anti-black prejudice of most local whites, and the the African American community's deep suspicion about uplift initiatives. Micheaux re-made this film as a "talkie" in 1939.

159 Fort Valley's city government website noted in 2010 that "Woolfolk Chemical Works built a plant in 1920 to manufacture agricultural chemicals in what is now downtown Fort Valley to fill the demand."

Local boosters inaugurated an annual Peach Blossom Festival in the early 1920s, and billed Fort Valley as "the peach capital of the world," but found that the 40,000 tourists who descended on the community were too disruptive to life and work, and so disbanded the festival in 1926.[160] Fort Valley's priority was growing large crops and keeping enough laborers on the farms and in the agriculturally-driven industries downtown. Only about fifteen percent of the county's 21,964 residents lived in Fort Valley proper, and the rural county had an overall population density of 375 people per square mile (by comparison, the more cosmopolitan Augusta, Georgia had sixteen times as many residents, and was located in a county with almost 2,000 people per square mile). Although there has been longstanding disagreement on whether cities erase or reinforce subcultures, urban sociologists tend to characterize cities as distinct from rural communities because of their greater variety of occupational groups, more differentiated class structure, greater ethnic and racial diversity, wider array of special interest groups organized around activities (e.g. hobbies), and greater numbers of specialized institutions (e.g. museums).[161] By most of these measures, Fort Valley in 1920 more closely resembled a rural hamlet than a cosmopolitan city like Chicago, which also owed much

---

<http://www.fortvalleyusa.com/history.cfm>. The town also boasted businesses that were common in the industrial urban South: three canning plants, two bottling works (one of which bottled Coca Cola), and a knitting mill. Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps for Georgia Towns and Cities, 1884-1922. Sanborn Maps, "Fort Valley, Georgia, 1920, Index Map." University of Georgia Libraries Map Collection.

160 National Geographic writer (and founding editor) Ralph Graves described the festival in 1926 as "a colorful, magnificently staged historical pageant ... which now attracts thousands to this progressive little town in the heart of the peach belt." Ralph Graves, "Marching Through Georgia Sixty Years After: Multifold Industries and Diversified Agriculture Are Restoring the Prosperity of America's Largest State East of the Mississippi." National Geographic (September 1926): 259-311.

161 Claude S. Fischer, "The Subcultural Theory of Urbanism: A Twentieth-Year Assessment." The American Journal of Sociology 101. 3 (November, 1995): 543-577.

of its prosperity to agricultural products and their processing. As with much of Georgia's Black Belt, the population of Fort Valley was predominantly African American (66%), and the city had only one Asian American resident. Although there was some local occupational diversity because of Fort Valley's retail shops and industrial plants, the majority of black people in the county worked on farms—mainly as sharecroppers or tenants. The area's farmers were served by a prominent local agricultural school modeled on Tuskegee.

Fort Valley High and Industrial School was technically an urban institution, but its concerns (and many of its students) were decidedly rural. The school in 1920 was a far cry from the institution that started two-and-a-half decades earlier in the basement of an Odd Fellows Lodge Hall. Fort Valley High and Industrial School trained black students to become tradespeople, teachers, domestic science professionals, and farmers, and also reached out to rural farm owners and laborers through its extension programs. Atlanta University graduate Henry A. Hunt had signed on as principal in 1904, vowing to put the colored school on sound financial footing. He more than kept that promise. By 1920, the school had a well-established demonstration farm and eight major buildings: a carpentry shop, a training school, a laundry, a domestic science school, a chapel (in a shared building with a recitation room and dormitories), Jerens Hall (with a dining room and dormitories), Huntington Hall (more dormitories), and the superintendant's residence. Hunt expanded the school's curriculum, and emphasized skilled trades and scientific agricultural instruction—particularly practical farming, gardening, and food preservation. Although black farm ownership rates only improved modestly in Georgia during the decade, there were other ways to measure the success of Fort Valley's educational outreach program. As Henry Hunt noted in 1920,

> The present somewhat gloomy outlook for farmers has been relieved to a marked degree for those farmers who have kept in close touch with the farm demonstration agent. A careful comparison...shows that in practically every case those who have followed the demonstration agent are in much better condition than those who have given little or no heed to such teachings. These men not only made a more effective fight against the boll weevil but in practially every case they have much larger quantities of food and feedstuffs for their own use.[162]

During Hunt's tenure, Fort Valley High and Industrial School initiated what became the largest annual black farmers conference in the state, a multi-day event that drew thousands of people from across rural Georgia. Hunt also created innovative print and in-person outreach programs in order to "give uplift and encouragement to the masses." He shared the work being done at the school with Georgia's black farmers via the Fort Valley Uplift and Fort Valley Message newspapers, and through demonstration work in outlying rural areas. Of particular note was the "Fort Valley Ham and Egg Show" developed by Otis Samuel O'Neal (the local County Agent and Farm Demonstration Agent, who was based at the school). A 1908 high school graduate of Fort Valley, O'Neal created the renowned annual agricultural products show on campus—and brought respect and acknowledgement to local black farmers for their achievements in raising pigs and poultry.[163]

Like Micheaux, Fort Valley's principal was outspoken about both the tangible economic opportunities for African American farmers, and the detrimental effects of race prejudice. By 1920, Hunt was a nationally-recognized spokesperson for black southern farmers.[164] At the NAACP's Tenth Anniversary Conference, he stated that anti-black

---

162 Henry Hunt, "Principal's Report for Year ending May 31, 1920 to the Trustees of the Fort Valley High and Industrial School, Fort Valley, Ga." Henry Hunt Papers, Hunt Memorial Library, Fort Valley State University.

163 Donnie D. Bellamy, "Henry A. Hunt and Black Agricultural Leadership in the New South." The Journal of Negro History 60. 4 (Oct., 1975): 464-473.

164 Among other honors, In 1918 Hunt was appointed by Georgia's governor to be the state supervisor of negro economics.

prejudice was ubiquitous in America (not confined to the South); he also asserted that black rural outmigration was not an intractable problem:

> One reason why we have not solved the problem is that both sides have been lying. Only by telling the truth are we going to get anywhere. We should get the facts as to whether Negroes are giving satisfaction or not.[165]

Also like Micheaux, Hunt was not afraid to criticize both the black and white communities for attitudes and practices that hampered uplift—and particularly, educational access.

NEW SCHOOL CINEMA

Part of Micheaux's black uplift strategy involved intertextuality—using his silent films to comment on other literary works and films such as The Clansman and The Birth of a Nation.[166] Just as Micheaux's early novels put themselves explicitly in conversation with mainstream fiction to identify with and teach readers about what made for a good story, so too did Micheaux's early films set themselves in dialog with movies made for predominantly white audiences—often with very different racial and aesthetic programs—in order to challenge the ideological underpinnings of anti-black racism. Within Our Gates debuted after the "red summer" of 1919—a season of bloody race riots

---

165 Hunt, Henry A. Rural Conditions of Labor, 1. NAACP Papers, Container B-2, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

166 Charles Musser noted the complex ways that Micheaux used Body and Soul's three source texts (the plays Roseanne, The Emperor Jones, and All God's Chillun) and the real-life celebrity of its leading man, Paul Robeson, to create dramatic inversions, revisions, and plot spoilers. Musser argued that Micheaux ultimately blurred the boundaries between art and real-life experience to comment on and reverse the three plays, written by whites about black life and experiences. Charles Musser, "To Redream the Dreams of White Playwrights: Reappropriation and Resistance in Oscar Micheaux's Body and Soul." The Yale Journal of Criticism 12. 2 (1999): 321-356. A related assertion can be made about Within Our Gates' engagement of Birth of a Nation's anti-black racism and the black community's real-life push for expanded educational opportunities in the rural South.

in cities across the country. Micheaux's rural heroines in both The Homesteader and The Symbol of the Unconquered confronted anti-black mob violence, and faced the immediate attacks and their aftermath with ingenuity and courage. Bowser and Spence describe the two characters as:

> rural women of progress. Their independence, strength, and bravery make them ideal partners for the hard frontier life. Both characters are involved in a life-and-death struggle against the forces of evil, and both are triumphant in the rescue of the hero.[167]

Eve Mason, the heroine of The Symbol of the Unconquered, successfully adjusts to rural life after she inherits land from her grandfather. With some help from her neighbors, she plants a garden, and makes a ramshackle cabin into a comfortable (albeit modest) home. Her transformation is so complete that when the Klan threatens to attack the hero, Mason jumps on a horse and rides through the woods alone at top speed to warn Van Allen of the danger. Sylvia Landry, the gentle and highly educated protagonist in Within Our Gates, survives both a sexual assault and a murderous mob attack on her sharecropping family—an attack in which her beloved foster parents are lynched. She demonstrates her mettle by moving to another black rural community to teach at a school for the children of poor black farmers; when the school falls on hard times, she travels north into the tough environment of the big city, and successfully raises enough money to keep the Piney Woods school open.[168]

---

167 Bowser and Spence, 38-9.

168 To be clear, Micheaux also presented rural black scoundrels—such as the opportunistic butler Eph (who falsely accuses Landry's father of murdering of a wealthy white landlord), and the tormented hotelier Driscoll (who passes for white, delights in humiliating and cheating local blacks, and foments the klan attack). But unlike in mainstream films, which only presented disreputable or comedic black characters, Micheaux's flawed African American characters' failings highlighted by contrast the admirable qualities of his heroes and heroines.

Beyond the general references to, and depictions of, anti-black mob violence (particularly lynching), and sexual assaults on black women by white men, Micheaux's Within Our Gates also had unique significance in the rural and near-rural South. Bowser and Spence note that the Piney Woods School, where the film's heroine Sylvia teaches, "was an actual school, founded in 1909 in Braxton, Mississipi, to provide industrial education for rural Blacks."[169] The real-life Piney Woods was extraordinary in many ways, some of which are captured by Micheaux's film, including the tenacity, optimism, and high moral standards of its faculty, and the dedication of its students—many of whom came from desperately poor farming backgrounds.[170] But part of what made this film relevant for audiences in Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina who saw Within Our Gates in the winter of 1920 was the fact that Piney Woods's story in so many ways resembled local struggles to build and maintain black primary and secondary schools.

In the 1920s, the rural and near-rural South was experiencing the first widespread push for black formal education since Reconstruction. Bowser and Spence, in their work on the education theme in Within Our Gates, noted that in 1922, per capita:

> $12 per year was being spent on the education of white children, and only $2.20 on African American children (who were also sometimes restricted to attending school only after the planting and harvesting were completed).[171]

Within Our Gates focused on its heroine's efforts to solicit school funds from individual donors in the North. Micheaux included scene after scene of Sylvia pounding the

---

169 Bowser and Spence, 137.

170 Three early accounts of the school were written by its founder, Laurence C. Jones: "Up Through Difficulties," (McClure's Magazine, 1910), Piney Woods and Its Story (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1922), and The Bottom Rail: Addresses and Papers (New York: Fleming H. Revel Company, 1935).

171 Bowser and Spence, 137.

proverbial northern pavement in search of financial contributions, and a handful of scenes in which she approached prosperous prospective donors with her appeal for Piney Woods. Many real-life southern school development initiatives were assisted by individual northerners' contributions, but much of the funding came from philanthropies such as the the John F. Slater Fund, the Peabody Education Fund, the Harmon Foundation, the Jeanes Fund (also known as the Negro Rural School Fund), and the Rosenwald Fund.[172] The Rosenwald Fund was particularly important because it was the only major philanthropy to focus on infrastructure support—a desperate need for segregated "colored" schools, which were typically housed in separate and unequal facilities in the 1920s. Between 1912 and 1932, Rosenwald provided the seed money to construct or dramatically remodel 4,977 schools, 217 teachers' homes, and 163 shop buildings for black students in the rural South. In 1920-21, the year Micheaux's film first circulated, 429 Rosenwald schools were built in the rural South, with the fund donating $356,335—approximately fifteen percent of the total building costs. Twelve of the 27 counties that showed Within Our Gates in the beginning of 1920 had (or were currently

172 The Jeanes Fund was established in 1907 by a $1 million grant from Quaker philanthropist Anna T. Jeanes of Philadelphia, and focused on upgrading vocational training in the rural South by training black teachers. Frequently noted in the contemporary black press, the Jeanes teachers (as the program's participants came to be known) reformed rural curriculum and promoted both industrial work and community self-help programs. The John F. Slater Fund had the same mission as (and shared staff and offices with) the Jeannes Fund, but spent most of its revenue for secondary and higher education, and also supported training in core academic (as well as vocational and industrial) subjects. The Peabody Education Fund was formed immediately after the Civil War to promote "intellectual, moral, and industrial education in the most destitute portion of the Southern States," established a school of education near Vanderbilt University, and operated until 1915. The William E. Harmon Foundation was established in 1922, and was a major patron of African American art. The Harmon Foundation sponsored a prestigious series of awards for distinguished achievements among negroes (many of which were awarded to rural reformers), and also sponsored travelling exhibitions.

building) new Rosenwald schools; all of the counties would have at least one Rosenwald school within a decade, many of them built in the early 1920s:

Table 6. Rosenwald Schools, Teachers' Residences, and Shop-Classrooms Built in Micheaux's Film Distribution Circuit

County	**Rosenwald Structures Built or In-Progress in 1920-21***	**1920-21 Rosenwald School Names & Size (in number of teachers)****	**Total Rosenwald Structures Built, 1920-1932**
Durham, NC	2	Walltown (4), Rougemont (2)	18
Rockingham, NC	2	Garrett Grove (1), Springfield School (1)	10
Dekalb & Fulton, GA	0	n/a	8
Spartanburg, SC	9	Africa (2), Bethesda (1), Corner (2), Siggsbee (2), Switzer (3), Cross Anchor (4), Union (3), Mountain View (2), Nazareth (1)	24
Mecklenburg, NC	5	Zoar (1), Pine Grove (1), Rockwell (4), Ebenezer (1), Huntersville (3)	24
Buncombe, NC	0	n/a	1
Greenwood, SC	0	n/a	2
Richland, SC	3	Blythewood (2), Smith Chapel (2), Rosenwald (2)	13
Orangeburg, SC	4	Florabranch (2), Rocky Swamp (3) Rowesville (3) Great Branch (2)	21
Wilson, NC	4	Kirby's Crossing (2), Lucania (2), Rocky Branch (3), Williamson (2)	14
Wayne, NC	1	Vail (2)	13
Craven, NC	1	Epworth (2)	7
Beaufort, NC	3	Chocowinty (3), Pantego (4), River Road (2)	6
Lenoir, NC	0	n/a	4
Glynn, GA	0	n/a	1
Laurens, GA	0	n/a	1
Washington, GA	0	n/a	3
Richmond, GA	0	n/a	1
Clarke, GA	1	County Training (4)	2
Bibb, GA	0	n/a	2
Greenville, SC	1	St. Albans County Training (4)	31
Muscogee, GA	0	n/a	2
Houston, GA***	0	n/a	8
Crisp, GA	0	n/a	1
Sumter, GA	0	n/a	9
Ware, GA	0	n/a	1

*These figures do not count the outhouses, sheds, and other small support buildings called for in Rosenwald plans as separate structures. **Rosenwald records indicate that some schools exceeded the recommended number of teachers, and pressed industrial, workroom, and storage space into use for regular class instruction.***Peach County, GA (carved out of Houston and Macon Counties in 1924) erected six Rosenwald buildings during this time period, including a 10-teacher county training school.

Even the predominantly urban Dekalb and Fulton Counties (where Atlanta was located) had areas that were still rural enough to qualify for Rosenwald support.

CONCLUSION: THE PAST AS VISUAL PROLOGUE

Because a significant amount of the school building funds came directly and indirectly from the local black communities the schools would serve (through contributions of time, money, building materials, and also tax dollars), communities were deeply invested in the new schools:

> Nina Clarke, a student and teacher at Rosenwald schools, remembers fried-chicken suppers and sandlot baseball games to raise money for the schools in the 1920s. In one place, struggling sharecroppers set aside an area planted with cotton as the "Rosenwald Patch" and donated the profits from its sale to the school. Children saved pennies in snuff boxes, and at one fundraising rally, an old man who had been a slave offered his life savings of $38 "to see the children of my grandchildren have a chance."[173]

Illustrated articles about new school construction and fundraising were circulated nationally by Tuskegee's extension department and reprinted by other black publications and news services in the 1920s, and were part of a longer conversation about black rural schooling catalyzed by visual images from the Hampton Institute at the turn-of-the-century.[174] Originally produced for the Negro Exhibit at the 1900 Paris Exposition, the

---

173Diane Granat, "Saving the Rosenwald Schools: Preserving African American History." APF Reporter 20. 4 (2003). Accessed January 10, 2011. <http://www.aliciapatterson.org/APF2004/Granat/Granat.html>

174 The Tuskegee Messenger ran the first of its reports in January of 1913, on school building in Loachapoka, Alabama. As Ray Sapirstein has noted, by the turn-of-the-century, Hampton had a well-organized, established, and sophisticated photographic culture. The school built a new darkroom for its active Camera Club in 1894. Hampton's

series of photographs of black and Indian education at Hampton taken by Frances Benjamin Johnston ultimately became some of the most widely circulated photographic images of rural African Americans—in large part thanks to Hampton's extensive use of the photographs in school publicity.[175] In the Hampton images (as in the many subsequent photographs of black rural education that Johnston's work inspired), farming was presented as a modern intellectual pursuit because of its associations with science and mechanization. Charts, diagrams, formulas, and scales abounded. In one Johnston photograph, a physics class of male and female students studies the pressure that screws apply to modern cheese presses. In another, male students dressed in immaculate white coveralls make butter in a modern mechanized dairy. Numerous images depict classes gathered in a courtyard or field—alert African American and Native American students with notepads in-hand—learning how to sketch and evaluate live agricultural animals such as horses and pigs, or experimenting with plants and soil.[176]

Southern Workman journal published its first photograph in an 1895 special edition printed about the Cotton States Exposition in Atlanta, and by 1899, the journal was consistently running photographs. The Camera Club subscribed to cutting edge photographic journals such as Camera Notes and Camera Work, rigorously critiqued each others' images, and allowed only the best images to be transferred to the school's Publication Office to be used for promotional and informational purposes. Ray Julius Sapirstein, "The View Within the Mask: The Illustrated Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Photography at Hampton Institute." M.A. Report. The University of Texas at Austin (1994): 49-52, 93-95.

175 The earliest republiations of these images appeared while the Negro Exhibit was still open in Paris. The February 1900 issue of the Southern Workman ran an article about the Hampton-run elementary school titled "The Beginnings of Citizenship," written by its principal, Mrs. Charles Bartlett Dyke, and illustrated with some of Johnston's photographs. The American Monthly Review of Reviews printed 40 of the Johnston photographs in its April 1900 article "'Learning By Doing' at Hampton," written by that publication's editor, Dr. Albert Shaw, who also happened to be a Hampton trustee.

176 Frances Benjamin Johnston, The Hampton Album (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966).

Figure 11. Frances Benjamin Johnston, "Agriculture. Mixing Fertilizer."

Figure 12. Frances Benjamin Johnston, "Agriculture. Plant Life. Studying the Seed."

The Hampton in-class photographs were often presented along with "before and after" images of ramshakle and improved homes, wells, and yards in the local African American community—with the modern conditions attributed to Hampton's work and influence. By the time Micheaux started making films in 1918, there was already a well-

established visual counter-narrative to the popular "local color" images of happy black men, women, and children in tattered clothes toiling in the fields, eating purloined watermelon, or simply loafing around. Rather than inventing a photographic grammar to depict modern black farmers, Micheaux entered into a long-running visual conversation about rural life—and upped the ante by making those still pictures move. But he also changed that visual conversation by excluding Native Americans from the modern rural enterprise. One result of his exclusion was the creative distortion of material and cultural conditions on the Great Plains. Another consequence was that Micheaux foreclosed on the possibility of depicting the full range of modern rural African Americans on film—a group that included tribal members, as well as blacks with other meaningful cultural and family ties to Native communities.

Micheaux's films showed complex a rural world full of vice, virtue, and the possibility of black economic and social uplift. Taken as a whole, his body of work posited a twist on the narrative of inevitable rural outmigration. The choice was not between the oppressive rural South and the liberating urban North; instead, Micheaux frequently presented the West as a new racial frontier, and independent farming, mining, and land ownership as viable options for New Negro life. His films were important in the cultural life of the many cities in which they were shown, but they were also important to their large rural audiences, particularly in the rural and near-rural South. In an era when, as the president of the American Country Life Association put it, "[t]o the average city-dweller the farm problem is less interesting than the Gobi desert,"[177] Micheaux's ability

177 Kenyon L. Butterfield, "The Rural Problem." Benjamin F. Hubert, ed., Negro Farm and Home Ownership Week. Association for the Advancement of Negro Country Life, Georgia State Industrial College, 1929. Library of Congress. Harmon Foundation Archives; William E. Harmon Awards for Distinguished Achievement Among Negroes." Award category: "Farming and Rural Life." Applicant file: Louis Henderson Martin.

to put films on the big screen that spoke both to and across the urban-rural divide was a major creative landmark. In so doing, he created both space and a visual language for the rural in modern black cinema.

Conclusion

In 1957, Henry Nash Smith wrote about the limits of paraphrase, and proposed that "a really exhaustive knowledge of the concrete case—a work of art, a specific situation, a career—might well lead to the recognition of aspects of the culture which have previously escaped attention."[1] I took this advice (and its formalist implications) to heart in this dissertation. My sustained attention to the concrete cases of Toomer, Hughes, and Micheaux did, in fact, lead to aspects of the culture which were flying under the scholarly radar—particularly, the conceptual and practical importance of rural people, places, and culture in the 1920s. Indeed, the interplay of rural and urban was both a constitutive element of much New Negro art, and a material reality in the lives of many African Americans. Competing claims about black rural agency and opportunity were a central feature of the New Negro landscape.

In the first decade of the New Negro movement, this creative dialogue between the country and the city took a myriad of forms. Urban artists traveled to rural communities for inspiration and material, and some challenged the conflation of "southern" and "rural" by depicting African American life in the rural West. They also depicted rural migrants who had moved to cities, trading on the rural associations of particular creative forms (such as dialect and the blues), and leveraging a rural aesthetics of reuse to forge connections between urban and rural black experiences. The art that resulted often presented black urban identity as a palimpsest; the New Negro city was a site where rural culture was layered, focused, and transformed—not eradicated. Far

[1] Henry Nash Smith, "Can 'American Studies' Develop a Method?" in Lucy Maddox, ed., Locating American Studies: The Evolution of a Discipline (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999): 12.

removed from the New Negro culture capital in Harlem, rural artists and editors took advantage of their peripheral geographic positions in order to argue for a distinctive rural black modernity that involved both migration to cities and the radical reform of agrarian communities. They proposed the unadorned farmer as a New Negro counterpart to the widely-recognized urban black dandy, and clarified the ideological relationships and discontinuities between these two different strategies of modern self-fashioning. They also presented rural domestic spaces as potentially complex, contested, and modern, and by so doing initiated broader conversations about the roles of women and girls in racial uplift.[2] Rural newspapers, school journals, Negro History Week programs, health campaigns, agricultural fairs, home and farm extension publications, and agricultural and industrial school curricula reprinted, performed, and claimed art with urban settings, authors, and themes as part of rural black life. And they changed that art by placing it in new rural contexts, and interpreting it in ways that made it speak directly to rural audiences and concerns.

The complexity of these cultural exchanges between urban and rural requires us to rethink many popular assumptions about 1920s black uplift—particularly, that it was an

---

[2] Mainstream understandings of American proto-modern literary style long-relied on an uncomplicated domesticity against which a modernist self-reflexive text could be distinguished. Similarly, 1920s black modernity has too often been defined as an exclusively urban phenomenon, and the rural used as a foil against which to theorize—in part because of a critical disinclination to take the rural home front seriously. As Lora Romero noted in her book on nineteenth century domesticity (a topic typically organized into binaries such as dominant/marginal, conservative/countercultural, and active/passive), it is difficult to conceptualize texts being radical on some issues and reactionary on others. Likewise, it is difficult to contend with discourses that are oppositional without being liberating: "[t]hese debates proceed from the assumption that culture either frees or enslaves. There appear to be no other choices." Lora Romero, Home Fronts: Domesticity and its Critics in the Antebellum United States (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1997): 4.

urban, bourgeois ideology imposed on rural blacks. Rural communities defined their own uplift programs, and implemented them despite significant obstacles. These reform efforts are easy to overlook because a defining characteristic of African American rural uplift in the early twentieth-century was its focus on superficially apolitical domestic concerns: growing gardens, canning food, building outhouses and screen doors, and rethinking the motives and mechanics behind (and implications of) routine house- and farmyard work. But much of that seemingly modest uplift work was animated by the radical desire to dismantle white hegemony. African Americans vigorously opposed southern racial regimes through modern farming in the South, and routinely used subterfuge and doublespeak to create a space for their assertions of black subjectivity, agency, and humanity. New Negro artists (including Toomer and Hughes) visited rural black communities engaged in just such modern uplift work, came away with widely different opinions about what they saw, and created art that depicted and obscured those uplift efforts. And the African American artists who forged their reputations on art about rural people and themes were sometimes celebrated, and sometimes lambasted, for the perceived veracity of their representations of black rural life.

While doing research for this project, I was surprised and delighted by the connections I found between people and places, and tried to weave these subtly through the dissertation: Langston Hughes at Jean Toomer's plantation homeplace in 1927 with Zora Neale Hurston, and then at the backwoods entertainment in Fort Valley, Georgia (a town where Oscar Micheaux's films showed); the personal (as well as pegagogical) links between the black agricultural school in Fort Valley and the Sparta Agricultural and Industrial Institute, and both of those schools' connections to Tuskegee; George Washington Carver (from Tuskegee) traveling to St. Mary's County to teach a master class to the Cardinal Gibbons students; Carter Woodson (Langston Hughes's former

boss) writing an article for the Cardinal's Notebook; the fact that one of the two Tuskegee faculty architects who designed the Sparta school building where Jean Toomer taught (Professor William Hazel) was the father of Constance Daniel—the Assistant Principal at the Cardinal Gibbons Institute. George Hutchinson made interconnections the subject of his pathbreaking work, The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White; my work shows that it is possible to follow suit and systematically document the personal and professional rural connections of key New Negro figures.

In terms of method, what I hope I have conveyed through the particular cases of Toomer, Hughes, and Micheaux is that sustained close reading and serious cultural study should not be either/or propositions—that historical and biographical arguments can be usefully complicated, challenged, and enriched by formal analysis of works of art (in part because the combination of methods provides a means of accounting for the fact that artists are often indifferent critics of their own work). Despite its difficulties, I am also excited about the combination of archival and formalist literary investigation because of its potential to move scholars away from assessments of literary works based on single formal properties, and towards more wholistic assessments that consider how literary forms, structures, and textures work together to create meaning in particular cultural contexts.

The form of the dissertation conveys neatness and completion, but there is so much more to be said. The Cardinal's Notebook commentary on Hughes's poem "A Song to a Negro Wash-woman" suggests that modern rural uplift practices, objects, and locations were in conversation with the most mainstream of New Negro literature. The fact that these rural objects, practices, and locales (though not themselves considered art) were thought to be part of the same cultural conversation about African American worth and creative potential suggests the efficacy of think more systematically about their

formal properties, and the ways those properties created distinctive (and shaping) contexts for New Negro literature and visual art. Shawn Michelle Smith's inquiries into the spatial politics of the "Negro Exhibit" at the 1900 Paris Exposition are part of her formal analysis of photographs in American Archives (1999), and she also demonstrates the efficacy of comparing multiple visual archives in Photography on the Color Line (2004). These two books, and Kendrick Grandison's article "Negotiated Space: The Black College Campus as a Cultural Record of Postbellum America" (1999), which analyzes landscape and land use as well as architectural properties, provide inspiring models of how to think broadly about formalism and contextual meaning, and, I would argue, have potentially important applications in rural literary studies. I also take very seriously David Nicholls' arguments in Conjuring the Folk about the rural inflection of the term "folk" in the 1920s—particularly because that category has long been a mainstay in scholarship about the New Negro movement, and is typically used without much attention to its period connotations. Karl Hagstrom Miller's point in Segregating Sound is also important: the 1920s folk was itself a modern category that emerged from decades-long negotiations within anthropology and folklore about the nature and meaning of cultural change, continuity, and value. These discussions about period meanings are essential because the folk is a key point of entry into important New Negro creative explorations of rural people, lifeways, themes, and creative forms.

Because of its focus on the reciprocal nature of urban-rural cultural and material flows in the 1920s, my project also implicitly calls into question the accuracy and generalizability of major works in contemporary African American studies by destabilizing the cosmopolitan bias that undergirds much of the analysis. For example, Daphne Lamothe describes a myriad of New Negro ethnographic efforts to document "backward" rural cultures thought to be threatened by urban modernity in Inventing the

New Negro, but fails to consider the ways in which these efforts were complicated by the presence of rural New Negro subjects who were in turn interpreting and revising urban creative work for their own ends. In Camera Works, Michael North contends that photography both profoundly influenced twentieth-century writers, and was itself a kind of modern writing that troubled relationships between the sonic, the linguistic, and the pictorial—but does not explain why artists invested in the idea of a new "sign system belonging to no one and thus able to leap all boundaries of class, race, and nationality"[3] would embrace and manipulate a divergence in rural and urban film aesthetics. The African American rural also changes the conversation about diaspora initiated by Paul Gilroy by moving us away from models of cosmopolitan exchange in order to think about the "roots and routes" of rural transnational cultural flows (along the lines of the 1920s Afro-Cuban institutional collaborations with Tuskegee described by Frank Guridy). As a result, Brent Hayes Edwards theory of décalage—the elements that resist or escape translation in diasporic exchange—might productively be applied not just to cosmopolitan exchanges, but also to intra-national rural-urban cultural contacts, as well as to questions of rural-urban transnational translation.[4]

As so many African Americanists have done over the past four decades, I submit my findings on Toomer, Hughes, and Micheaux with the humbling sense that they are provisional—and will need to be revised as more primary source material (hopefully) comes to light. Probably because of the strange combination of wistfulness and optimism borne from repeated attempts to track down sources that may have been long disposed of,

---

[3] Michael North, Camera Works: Photography and the Twentieth-Century Word (New York: Oxford UP, 2005): 8.

[4] Brent Hayes Edwards, The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003): 12-15, 68.

I often find myself thinking of an exchange in Tom Stoppard's play, Arcadia, between Thomasina and Septimus, in which the girl laments the burning of the library at Alexandria, and the body of work that she will never get to read:

> Oh, Septimus! —can you bear it? All the lost plays of the Athenians! Two hundred at least by Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides—thousands of poems—Aristotle's own library brought to Egypt by the noodle's ancestors! How can we sleep for grief?[5]

This is my litany: Oscar Micheaux's business records, and all of his missing films; the complete booking records of any rural black movie theater in the 1920s; the diaries of Jean Toomer's fellow teachers and students at the Sparta Agricultural and Industrial Institute; a complete run of the Cardinal's Notebook; all the poems and school records and agricultural fair programs and small black newspapers that I tried and failed to find.

When I was doing research at the Library of Congress, I came across a 1926 letter that I copied because it was beautiful and brutal:

> Dear Sir,
>
> I am indeed very sorry that I mailed to you those little original verses of my own the day before I rec'd the specifications from you. I did not know they had to be published material....therefore, I am sending you a blank envelope and you will find enclosed...postage stamps for their return....I havent been writing verses very long. Neither do I know why I started writing them. But I am trying to find some one who will take the Original's. As I have quite a few of them, some of which refer to nature, the soul, and other things.[6]

This letter was sent by Effie Watson, a housewife and mother of five from rural Kansas, who applied for a William E. Harmon Award for Distinguished Achievement Among Negroes in Literature (an award that was given that year to William Stanley Braithwaite

---

[5] Tom Stoppard, Arcadia (London: Faber and Faber, 1993): 38.

[6] Effie E. Watson, "Application: William E. Harmon Award for Distinguished Achievement Among Negroes in Literature." Harmon Foundation, Inc. Records, Library of Congress ("Award Program" series).

and Joel Spingarn). Watson had written five poems out on the back of an application blank, and she valued them enough to want them back—even though the contest staff made it plain that they could not accept her entry. One of Watson's letters of reference in the same file noted that she also did needlework, wrote short stories, and made beautiful pottery vases; her referee described her as a person of "unusual talent" who achieved things "against all obstacles." It grieves me to know that I will likely never read Watson's other poems, and I hope that someone other than the author valued them enough to keep them safe.

When I think of Effie Watson, I am profoundly grateful for the many documents I was able to find in the course of this research. I am also grateful for the myriad ways that gaps in the historical and creative record force scholars to be creative—to dig deep into the literary and visual and sonic forms we do have in our possession. A formalist approach is one response to the material constraints of the African American literary archive; there are others that can contend with gaps, fragments, hints, and echoes. I made the choice to combine cultural history and formal study because I think the combination allows me to speak to the complexity of New Negro creative works, and the high value those artists placed on imaginative constructions (which, they believed, could change material conditions and institutional structures). New Negro art was, in a very fundamental sense, always about both aesthetics and the material world. My methodology allowed me to set terms of critical engagement that acknowledged and responded at every turn to that fusion of ethics and aesthetics.

Bibliography

Abbott, Eleanor Hallowell. The White Linen Nurse. New York: Century Co., 1913.

Adams, Jessica. Wounds of Returning: Race, Memory, and Property on the Postslavery Plantation. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2007.

Altieri, Charles. Canons and Consequences: Reflections on the Ethical Force of Imaginative Ideals. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1990.

Armstrong, John. "The Real Negro." New York Tribune (14 Oct. 1923): 26.

"The Austin Theatre." Fort Valley Main Street. 2011. Downtown Development Authority of Fort Valley. 12 Jan. 2011. <http://www.fortvalleymainstreet.org/austintheatre.cfm>

Baker, Jr., Houston A. Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987.

—. Turning South Again: Rethinking Modernism/Re-reading Booker T, (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2001).

Baldwin, Davarian L. Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2007.

Barnie, John. "Formulaic Lines and Stanzas in the Country Blues." Ethnomusicology, 22.3 (Sept., 1978): 457-473.

Barry, John M. Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood and How it Changed America. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997.

Baudelaire, Charles. "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863) reprinted in P. E. Charvet, trans., Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Literature. New York: Viking, 1972).

Bederman, Gail. Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995.

Bellamy, Donnie D. "Henry A. Hunt and Black Agricultural Leadership in the New South." The Journal of Negro History, 60.4 (October 1975): 464-479.

Bernard, Emily, ed. Remember Me To Harlem: The Letters of Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten, 1925-1964. New York: Knopf, 2001.

Berry, Faith. "Black Poets, White Patrons: The Harlem Renaissance Years of Langston Hughes." Crisis 88.6 (July 1981): 278-83.

Best, Stephen M. The Fugitive's Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004.

Betts, M. C. and W. R. Humphries. "Planning the Farmstead." U.S. Department of Agriculture, Farmers' Bulletin No. 1132 (August, 1920): 1-24.

Birth of a Nation (1915) Director: D. W. Griffith; Producers: D. W. Griffith and David Shepard.

Birthright (1924) Director and Producer: Oscar Micheaux.

Birthright (1939) Director and Producer: Oscar Micheaux.

"Black Extension Service." Handbook of Texas Online. Retrieved August 2010, from the General Libraries at the University of Texas at Austin and the Texas State Historical Association. <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/.>

Body and Soul (1925) Director and Producer: Oscar Micheaux.

Donald Bogle, Donald. Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films. New York: Continuum, 2001.

Bolden, Tony. Afro-Blue: Improvisations in African American Poetry and Culture. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2004.

—. "All the Birds Sing Bass: The Revolutionary Blues of Jayne Cortez." African American Review, 35.1 (Spring 2001): 61-71.

Bowser, Pearl and Louise Spence. Writing Himself Into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences. New Brunswixck: Rutgers UP, 2000.

Braithwaite, W.S. Anthology of Magazine Verse. New York: G. Sully, 1927.

Brown, Sterling. "The Blues." Phylon 13.4 (1952): 286-292.

Brunn, Stanley D. and Karl B. Raitz. "Regional Patterns of Farm Magazine Publication." Economic Geography 54.4 (October 1978): 277-90.

Buck-Morss, Susan. "Hegel and Haiti." Critical Inquiry 26.4 (Summer 2000): 821-865.

Butters, Gerald R. "Portrayals of Black Masculinity in Oscar Micheaux's The Homesteader." Literature/Film Quarterly 28.1 (2000): 54-59.

Butterfield, Kenyon L. "The Rural Problem." In Benjamin F. Hubert, ed., Negro Farm and Home Ownership Week. Association for the Advancement of Negro Country Life, Georgia State Industrial College, 1929. "William E. Harmon Awards for Distinguished Achievement Among Negroes," Harmon Foundation, Inc. Records, Library of Congress ("Award Program" series; folder: "Louis Henderson Martin").

Campbell, T.M. The Movable School Goes to the Negro Farmer, Tuskegee: Tuskegee Institute P, 1936.

Carby, Hazel. "The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston." Genevieve Fabre and Robert O'Meally, eds. History and Memory in African American Culture (New York: Oxford UP, 1994): 28-44.

Cardinal's Notebook (journal). Ridge, Maryland: Cardinal Gibbons Institute, 1928-1932.

Carroll, Rebecca, ed. Uncle Tom or New Negro? African Americans Reflect on Booker T. Washington and Up From Slavery 100 Years Later. New York: Broadway Books, 2006.

Castronovo, Russ. "Beauty along the Color Line: Lynching, Aesthetics, and the *Crisis*." PMLA 121.5 (October 2006): 1443-1459.

Cherniavsky, Eva. Incorporations: Race, Nation, and the Body Politics of Capital. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006.

Chesnutt, Charles. The House Behind the Cedars. New York: Modern Library, 2003.

Chicago Defender (newspaper). Chicago, Illinois: Robert S. Abbott Pub. Co., 1905-1956.

Chinitz, David. "Literacy and Authenticity: The Blues Poems of Langston Hughes" Callaloo 19.1 (Winter 1996): 177-192.

Ciraulo, Dina. "Narrative Style in Oscar Micheaux's Within Our Gates." Wide Angle 20 (October 1998): 75-91.

"City History." Fort Valley, Georgia: Where Caring is a Way of Life. 2006. Mayor and Council of Fort Valley. 8 Jan, 2011. <http://www.fortvalleyusa.com/history.cfm>

Comrades. 21" x 11". World War I Poster Collection, United War Work Campaign. Special Collections, Tutt Library, Colorado College, Colorado Springs, Colorado. 17 Jan. 2011.<http://www.coloradocollege.edu/library/specialcollections/historicalcollections/wwi/UWWC141.html>

Corbould, Clare. Becoming African Americans: Black Public Life in Harlem, 1919-1939. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009.

Coulter, J. L. "Agricultural Development in the United States, 1900-1910." The Quarterly Journal of Economics, 27.1 (November 1912): 1-26.

The Crisis (journal). New York, New York: The Crisis Publishing Co., 1910-2011.

Cromartie, John and Shawn Bucholtz, "Defining the 'Rural' in Rural America." Amber Waves (June 2008). 9 September 2010. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/AmberWaves/June08/Features/RuralAmerica.htm.>

Cronon, William. Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West. New York: W. W. Norton, 1992.

Crosby, Earl W. "Limited Success against Long Odds: The Black County Agent." Agricultural History 57.3 (July 1983): 277-88.

Dace, Tish and Thomas Inge, eds. Langston Hughes: The Contemporary Reviews. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009.

Daniel, Constance. "Escape." Cardinal's Notebook (April 1930): 7.

Daniel, Victor Hugo. "Application, William E. Harmon Award for Distinguished Achievement Among Negroes in Farming and Rural Life, 1930." Harmon Foundation, Inc. Records, Library of Congress (Box 38, "Award Program" series; folder: "Daniel, Victor Hugo").

Davis, Angela. Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday. New York: Vintage, 1999.

Delaney, David. Race, Place, and the Law: 1836-1948. Austin: U of Texas P, 1998.

Denby, Charles. Indignant Heart: A Black Worker's Journal. Boston: South End Press, 1978.

Domingo, W.A. "Gift of the Black Tropics." In Alain Locke, ed. The New Negro (reprint of the 1925 edition). New York: Touchstone, 1997.

Douglas, Ann. Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995.

DuBois, W. E. B. "The Negro Landholder of Georgia." Bulletin of the Department of Labor 1.350 (July 1901): 647-777.

—, Souls of Black Folk. Reprinted in Three Negro Classics. New York: Avon Books, 1965.

— and Alain Locke, "The Younger Literary Movement." Crisis 27 (February 1924): 161-63.

Düchting, Hajo. Paul Klee: Painting Music. Munich: Prestel, 1997.

Durham, Frank, ed. Studies in Cane. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1971.

"Early Wheat Harvesting in the Northwest," Ag Equipment Power (September 2001).

Ebron, Paulla A. "Enchanted Memories of Regional Difference in African American Culture." American Anthropologist 100.1 (March 1998): 94-105.

Edwards, Brent Hayes. The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003.

Ellison, Ralph. Invisible Man. New York: Vintage International, 1995.

Fabian, Johannes. Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object. New York: Columbia UP, 2002.

Fabre, Michael. From Harlem to Paris. Champaign: U of Illinois P, 2003.

Faulkner, Janette, and Robbin Henderson. Ethnic Notions: Black Images in the White Mind. Berkeley: Berkeley Art Center, 2000.

Ferguson, Karen J. "Caught in 'No Man's Land': The Negro Cooperative Demonstration Service and the Ideology of Booker T. Washington, 1900-1918." Agricultural History 72.1 (Winter 1998): 33-54.

Fischer, Claude S. “The Subcultural Theory of Urbanism: A Twentieth-Year Assessment.” The American Journal of Sociology 101.3 (November, 1995): 543-577.

Fisk University Rosenwald Fund Card Database. Special Collections, Fisk University, <http://rosenwald.fisk.edu/?module=search.>

Fleetwood, Nicole. Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2011.

Floyd, Jr., Samuel A. “Black Music in the Driscoll Collection.” The Black Perspective in Music 2.2 (Autumn, 1974): 158-71.

Foley, Barbara. “In The Land of Cotton: Economics and Violence in Jean Toomer’s Cane.” African American Review 32.2 (Summer 1998): 181-98.

—. "Jean Toomer's Sparta." American Literature 67 (1995): 747-75.

Ford, Karen Jackson. Split-Gut Song: Jean Toomer and the Poetics of Modernism. Tuscaloosa, AL: U of Alabama P, 2005.

Fussell, Paul. Poetic Meter & Poetic Form. New York: McGraw Hill, 1979.

Gaines, Kevin K. Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1996.

“Gal.” Oxford English Dictionary Online. Accessed September 12, 2010.

Gates, Jr. , Henry Louis. Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the “Racial” Self. New York: Oxford UP, 1989.

—. “Harlem on Our Minds.” Critical Inquiry 24.1 (Autumn 1997): 1-12.

—. The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism. New York: Oxford UP, 1988.

Genung, A.B. “The Purchasing Power of the Farm Dollar from 1913 to the Present.” ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 117. 1 (January 1925): 22-26.

Gilbert, Charlene and Quinn Eli. Homecoming: The Story of African American Farmers. Boston: Beacon P, 2000.

Gilmore, Glenda. Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1996.

Gilroy, Paul. The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000.

Glaude, Eddie. In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2007.

Goings, Kenneth W. Mammy and Uncle Mose: Black Collectibles and American Stereotyping. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994.

Granat, Diane. "Saving the Rosenwald Schools: Preserving African American History." APF Reporter Vol. 20, No. 4 (2003). 10 January 2011. <http://www.aliciapatterson.org/APF2004/Granat/Granat.html>

Grandison, Kendrick Ian. "Negotiated Space: The Black College Campus as a Cultural Record of Postbellum America." American Quarterly 51.3 (Sept. 1999): 529-79.

Green, J. Ronald. "The Micheaux Style." Black Film Review 7.4 (1992): 32-34.

Green, Laurie. Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2007.

Gregory, Montgomery. "A Review of Cane." Opportunity 1 (Dec. 1923): 374-5.

Griffin, Farrah. "Who Set You Flowin'?" The African American Migration Narrative. New York: Oxford UP, 1995.

Guridy, Frank. Forging Diaspora: Afro-Cubans and African Americans in a World of Empire and Jim Crow. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2010.

Habermas, Jürgen. The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures. Cambridge: MIT P, 1990.

Hahn, Steven. A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003.

Hanchett, Tom. "Beacons for Black Education in the American South." Rosenwald Schools. 2004. 12 Feb. 2011. <http://www.rosenwaldplans.org/SchoolPlans.html.>

"William E. Harmon Award for Distinguished Achievement Among Negroes." Harmon Foundation, Inc. Records, 1913-1967, Library of Congress ("Award Program" series).

Hartman, Saidiya V. Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America. New York: Oxford UP, 1997.

Hemenway, Robert E. Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography. Champaign: U of Illinois P, 1977.

Henderson, H. Donald. "The Statistics of the Migration." The Journal of Negro History 6.4 (October 1921): 471-84.

Hersey, Mark. "Hints and Suggestions to Farmers: George Washington Carver and Rural Conservation in the South." Environmental History 11 (April 2006):

Hibbard, Addison. "Aesop in Negro Dialect." American Speech 1.9 (June 1926): 495-99.

Historical Census Browser. University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center. 2010. <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html.>

The Homesteader (1918) Director and Producer: Oscar Micheaux.

The House Behind the Cedars (1927) Director and Producer: Oscar Micheaux.

Hoberman, James. "Bad Movies." Film Comment 16. 4 (July-August 1980): 7-12.

Hogan, Lawrence D. A Black National News Service. Cranberry, New Jersey: Associated UP, 1984.

Holmes, Dwight O. The Evolution of the Negro College. New York: Columbia UP, 1934.

Holloway, Jonathan. "Jim Crow Wisdom." Stanford Humanities Center. Stanford, California. October 5, 2004.

Holt, Marilyn Irvin. Linoleum, Better Babies & the Modern Farm Woman, 1890-1930. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2006.

hooks, bell. "Micheaux: Celebrating Blackness." Black American Literature Forum 25.2 (Summer 1991): . Reprinted in Black Looks: Race and Representation. Boston: South End P, 1992.

Howard, L. O. "The Mexican Cotton Boll Weevil." Science, 18.465 (November 1903): 693.

Hubert, Benjamin F., ed. Negro Farm and Home Ownership Week. Georgia State Industrial College: Association for the Advancement of Negro Country Life, 1929. "William E. Harmon Awards for Distinguished Achievement Among Negroes," Harmon Foundation, Inc. Records, Library of Congress (Box 38, "Award Program" series; folder: "Louis Henderson Martin").

Hudson, John. "Two Dakota Homestead Frontiers." Annals of the Association of American Geographers 63.4 (December 1973):

Hughes, Langston. "Alabama Earth." Tuskegee Messenger (June 1928).

—. The Big Sea. New York: Hill and Wang, 1993.

—. The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes. Ed. Arnold Rampersad. New York: Vintage Classics, 1995.

—. Fine Clothes to the Jew. New York: Knopf, 1927.

—. I Wonder as I Wander. New York: Hill and Wang, 1993.

—. "Journals: 1920-1937." Langston Hughes Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Box: 586.

—. "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." The Nation (June 1926): 692-94.

—. "A Song to a Negro Wash-woman," Cardinal's Notebook (January 1930).

—. "A Song to a Negro Wash-woman," Crisis (January 1925): 115.

—. The Weary Blues. New York: Knopf, 1926.

Hunt, Henry. "Principal's Report for Year ending May 31, 1920 to the Trustees of the Fort Valley High and Industrial School, Fort Valley, Ga." Henry Hunt Papers, Hunt Memorial Library, Fort Valley State University.

—. Rural Conditions of Labor, 1. NAACP Papers (Container B-2), Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

Hutchinson, George. "Harlem Central." American Literary History 23.2 (Summer 2011): 405-422.

—."Jean Toomer and American Racial Discourse." Texas Studies in Literature and Language 35.2 (Summer 1993): 226-50.

—. "Whitman and the Black Poet: Kelly Miller's Speech to the Walt Whitman Fellowship." American Literature 61.1 (March, 1989): 46-58.

"Industrial & Offline Terminal Railroads of Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island, Bronx & Manhattan: Harlem Transfer." Trainweb. Local history website. 6 June 2010. <http://members.trainweb.com/bedt/indloco/ht.html>

"Inspection Sheet." Health for the Farmer. Fifth Annual Health Campaign. Ridge, Maryland: Cardinal Gibbons Institute, 1929.

Jeffries, Hasan Kwame. Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt. New York: New York UP, 2009.

Johnson, C. S. Ebony and Topaz. NY: National Urban League, 1927.

Johnson, James Weldon, ed. The Book of American Negro Poetry. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1922.

Johnston, Frances Benjamin. The Hampton Album. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966.

Jones, Janna. The Southern Movie Palace: Rise, Fall, and Resurrection. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2003.

Jones, Laurence C. Piney Woods and Its Story. New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1922.

—. The Bottom Rail: Addresses and Papers. New York: Fleming H. Revel, 1935.

Jones, Meta DuEwa. "Listening to What the Ear Demands: Langston Hughes and His Critics." Callaloo 25.4 (Fall 2002): 1145-1175.

Jones, Robert B. Jean Toomer and the Prison-House of Thought:A Phenomenonology of the Spirit. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1993.

Joy, Geo. W. "Annual Financial Statement of Geo. W. Joy, Treasurer Board of Education, for the Fiscal Year Ended July 3Ist, 1917." St. Mary's Beacon (December 12, 1924).

Jung, Udo O. H. "Spirit-Torsos of Exquisite Strength: The Theme of Individual Weakness vs. Collective Strength in Two of Jean Toomer's Poems." In Therman B. O'Daniel, ed. Jean Toomer: A Critical Evaluation. Washington: Howard UP, 1988.

Kennedy, David M. Freedom From Fear: The American People in Freedom and War, 1929-1945. New York: Oxford UP USA, 1999.

Kline, Ronald. Consumers in the Country: Technology and Social Change in Rural America. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2002.

Kolocotroni, Vassiliki et al, eds. Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998.

Lawrence, D. H. Studies in Classic American Literature. New York: Penguin Books, 1977.

Leab, Daniel J. "'All-Colored'—But Not Much Different: Films Made for Negro Ghetto Audiences, 1913-1928." Phylon 36.3 (3rd Quarter 1975): 321-339.

Leader Tribune and Peachland Journal (newspaper). Fort Valley, Georgia: Leader-Tribune Co., 1920-1924.

Kaplan, Carla, ed. Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters. New York: Anchor Books, 2003.

Leslie, Kent Anderson. Woman of Color, Daughter of Privilege: Amanda America Dickson, 1849-1893. Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 1995.

Kerman, Cynthia Earl and Richard Elridge. The Lives of Jean Toomer: A Hunger for Wholeness. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1987.

Kerr, Catherine E. "Incorporating the Star: The Intersection of Business and Aesthetic Strategies in Early American Film." The Business History Review 64.3 (Autumn 1990): 383-410.

Kyriakoudes, Louis M. "Southern Black Rural-Urban Migration in the Era of the Great Migration: Nashville and Middle Tennessee, 1890-1930." Agricultural History 72.2 (Spring 1998): 341-51.

Lamothe, Daphne. Inventing the New Negro: Narrative, Culture, and Ethnography. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2008.

Lasker, Bruno. "Doors Open Southward." The Survey (1 Nov. 1923): 190-1.

Levin, Dana. "Drama, Silence, Speed, Assemblage and Accrual, or Five Poems That Taught Me Something About the Line (with No Thanks to Facebook)." Warren Wilson College, Asheville, North Carolina. July 4, 2009.

Lewis, David Levering. The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader. New York: Penguin, 1995.

—. When Harlem Was In Vogue. New York: Knopf, 1981.

Lindell, Lisa. "Bringing Books to a 'Book-Hungry Land': Print Culture on the Dakota Prairie. Book History 7 (2004): 215-38.

Littell, Robert. "A Review of Cane." The New Republic (26 Dec. 1923): 126.

Locke, Alain, ed. Four Negro Poets. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1927.

—. The Negro and His Music. (reprint of 1935 edition). Salem, New Hampshire: Ayer, 1988.

— ed. The New Negro (reprint of the 1925 edition). New York: Touchstone Books, 1992.

Macon. Interior of Douglass Theatre, located in 300 block of Broadway. Charles H. Douglass operated the theater and the hotel next to it for African-Americans. Vanishing Georgia Photographic Collection, Georgia Archives, Office of Secretary of State. (Image id: bib158. Indexed as: bib157). 31 Dec. 2010 <http://cdm.sos.state.ga.us/cdm4/vanishing.php>

Maddox, Lucy, ed. Locating American Studies: The Evolution of a Discipline. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999.

Manning, Maurice. "Blue Yodel." Warren Wilson College, Asheville, North Carolina. January 11, 2010.

"Mapping Moviegoing in North Carolina." Going to the Show. Robert C. Allen, Natasha Smith, Erle Still, et. al. 2008. U. of North Carolina Library. 10 Dec. 2010. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/gtts/>

Marchand, Roland. Advertising the American Dream. Berkeley: U of California P, 1986.

Marcus, Jane. "Bonding and Bondage: Nancy Cunard and the Making of the Negro Anthology." Borders, Boundaries, and Frames: Essays in Cultural Criticism and Cultural Studies, Mae G. Henderson, ed. New York: Routledge, 1995.

Massood, Paula J. Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2003.

Mayberry, D. B. "The Tuskegee Moveable School: A Unique Contribution to National and International Agriculture and Rural Development." Agricultural History 65.2 (Spring 1991): 85-104.

McAdams, Eileen B. "Sparta Agricultural and Industrial Institute." Hancock County Georgia Schools (2005). Local hisory website. 22 Oct. 2010. <http://www.georgiagenealogy.org/hancock2/spartaa&i.html.>

McGilligan, Patrick. Oscar Micheaux: The Great and Only. New York: HarperCollins, 2008.

McGuire, Danielle L. At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power. New York: Knopf, 2010.

Micheaux, Oscar. The Conquest: Story of a Negro Pioneer. New York: Washington Square P, 2003.

—. The Forged Note: A Romance of the Darker Races. Reprint of the 1915 edition. Charleston, South Carolina: BiblioLife, 2010.

—. The Homesteader: A Novel. Reprint of the 1917 edition. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1994.

—. The Wind From Nowhere. New York: Book Supply Company, 1943.

—. "Where the Negro Fails." Chicago Defender (March 19th 1910).

—. "Colored Americans Too Slow to Take Advantage of Great Land Opportunities Given Free by the Government." Chicago Defender (October 28, 1911).

Micheaux, Swan. Letter to George P. Johnson (October 27, 1920). George P. Johnson Negro Film Collection (Collection 1042). Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

Mico, Melinda. "'Blood and Money': The Case of Seminole Freedmen and Seminole Indians in Oklahoma." Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds: The African Diaspora in Indian Country, Tiya Miles and Sharon P. Holland, eds. Durham: Duke UP, 2006.

Miles, Tiya and Sharon P. Holland, eds. Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds: The African Diaspora in Indian Country. Durham: Duke UP, 2006.

Miller, Karl Hagstrom. Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow. Durham: Duke UP, 2010.

Miller, Monica L. Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity. Durham: Duke UP, 2009.

Miller, Theresa A. New Negro Artists in Paris: African American Painters and Sculptons in the City of Light, 1922-1934. Newark: Rutgers UP, 2001.

Mitchell, Michele. Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2004.

Moore, Cecilia A. "To 'Be of Some Good to Ourselves and Everybody Else': The Mission of the Cardinal Gibbons Institute, 1924-1934." U.S. Catholic Historian 16.3 (Summer 1998): 45-66.

Moos, Daniel. "Reclaiming the Frontier: Oscar Micheaux as Black Turnerian." African American Review 36.3 (Autumn, 2002): 357-81.

Moton, Robert Russa. "Hampton-Tuskegee: Missioners of the Masses." The New Negro (reprint of the 1925 edition). New York: Touchstone Books, 1992.

Musser, Charles. "To Redream the Dreams of White Playwrights: Reappropriation and Resistance in Oscar Micheaux's Body and Soul." The Yale Journal of Criticism 12.2 (1999): 321-56.

Neth, Mary. Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community, and the Foundations of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900-1940. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1995.

Nicholls, David. Conjuring the Folk: Forms of Modernity in African America. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2000.

North, Michael. Camera Works: Photography and the Twentieth-Century Word. New York: Oxford UP, 2005.

—. The Dialect Of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature. New York: Oxford UP, 1994.

O'Daniel, Therman B., ed. Jean Toomer: A Critical Evaluation. Washington: Howard UP, 1988.

O'Neill, Eugene. Plays: Anna Christie; All God's Chillun Got Wings; Diff'rent. New York: Boni & Liveright, 1925.

—.The Emperor Jones. Anna Christie. The Hairy Ape. New York: Vintage Books, 1972.

Patton, Venetria and Maureen Honey, eds. Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2001.

Phelan, Peggy. Unmarked: The Politics of Performance. New York: Routledge, 1993.

Phillips, Sara T. "Lessons from the Dust Bowl: Dryland Agriculture and Soil Erosion in the United States and South Africa, 1900-1950." Environmental History 4.2 (April 1999): 245-66.

Powell, Richard. "Sartor Africanus." Dandies: Fashion and Finesse in Art and Culture, ed. Susan Fillen-Yeah. New York: New York U P, 2001.

PBS, "Against the Odds: The Artists of the Harlem Renaissance" (film). Boston: PBS, 1998.

Ram, Harsha. "Modernism on the Periphery: Literary Life in Postrevolutionary Tbilisi." Kritika 5.2 (Spring 2004): 367-82.

Rampersad, Arnold. "Langston Hughes's *Fine Clothes to the Jew*" Callaloo 26 (Winter 1986): 144-46.

—. The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume 1: 1902-1941. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002.

Ramsey, William M. "Jean Toomer's Eternal South." Southern Literary Journal 36.1 (Fall, 2003): 74-89.

Rashid, Frank. "Robert Hayden's Detroit Blues Elegies." Callaloo 24.1 (Winter 2001): 200-26.

Regester, Charlene. "Headline to Headlights: Oscar Micheaux's Exploitation of the Rhinelander Case." The Western Journal of Black Studies 22.3 (1998): 195-204.

—. "The Misreading and Rereading of African American Filmmaker Oscar Micheaux: A Review of Micheaux Scholarship." Film History 7.4 (Winter, 1995): 426-49.

—. "Oscar Micheaux the Entrepreneur: Financing 'The House Behind the Cedars.'" Journal of Film and Video 49:1-2 (Spring-Summer 1997): 17-27.

Reid, Debra Ann. Reaping a Greater Harvest: African Americans, the Extension Service, and Rural Reform in Jim Crow Texas. Dissertation. College Station, TX: Texas A&M, 2007.

Rice, Alice Hegan. A Romance of Billy-Goat Hill. New York: Century Co, 1912.

Rickford, John. African American Vernacular English. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1999.

Ritterhouse, Jennifer. Growing Up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2006.

Rolinson, Mary G. Grassroots Garveyism: The Universal Negro Improvement Association in the Rural South, 1920-1927. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2007.

Romero, Lora. Home Fronts: Domesticity and its Critics in the Antebellum United States. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1997.

Rooks, Noliwe. Ladies' Pages: African American Women's Magazines and the Culture that Made Them. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004.

"Rosenwald Schools: Community School Plans, 1920-1928." National Trust for Historic Preservation website. 22 Sept. 2010. <http://www.preservationnation.org/travel-and-sites/sites/southern-region/rosenwald-schools/development-of-rosenwald-plans/community-school-plans.html.>

Royal, Alice C. Allensworth, the Freedom Colony: A California African American Township. Berkeley: Heyday P, 2008.

Sagee, Alona. "Bessie Smith, 'Down Hearted Blues' and 'Gulf Coast Blues' Revisited." Popular Music 26.1 (2007):

Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps for Georgia Towns and Cities, 1884-1922. Sanborn Maps, Fort Valley, Georgia, 1920. University of Georgia Libraries Map Collection.

Santamarina, Xiomara. Belabored Professions: Narratives of African American Working Womanhood. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2005.

Schell, Herbert S. History of South Dakota. Lincoln: U Nebraska P, 1975.

Schultz, Mark. The Rural Face of White Supremacy. Urbana, Illinois: U of Illinois P, 2005.

Scott, David. Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Enlightenment. Durham: Duke UP, 2004.

Scruggs, Charles and Lee Vandemarr. Jean Toomer and the Terrors of American History. Philadeliphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1998.

Sherrard-Johnson, Cherene. Portraits of the New Negro Woman: Visual and Literary Culture in the Harlem Renaissance. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2007.

Simms, James N., ed. Simms' Blue Book and National Negro Business and Professional Directory 1923. General Research and Reference Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

Singer, Alan and Allen Dunn, eds. Literary Aesthetics: A Reader. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000.

Sitton, Thad and James H. Conrad, Freedom Colonies: Independent Black Texans in the Time of Jim Crow. Austin: U of Texas P, 2005.

Slotkin, Richard. The Fatal Environment. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1998.

Smith, Henry Nash. "Can 'American Studies' Develop a Method?" in Lucy Maddox, ed., Locating American Studies: The Evolution of a Discipline. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999.

Smith, Mark M. How Race is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2006.

Smith, Shawn Michelle. American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999.

—. Photography on the Color Line: W. E. B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture. Durham: Duke UP, 2004.

Solard, Alain. "Myth and Narrative Fiction in Cane." Callaloo 8 (1985): 551-62.

"Some Facts About Benjamin F. Hubert." Harmon Foundation, Inc. Records, Library of Congress. Box 38. Folder title "Farming 1930."

Southern Workman (journal). Hampton, Virginia: Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute, 1900-1939.

The Sparta Ishmaelite (newspaper). Sparta, Georgia: Lewis & Moore, 1894-2008.

Spencer, John Michael. "The Diminishing Rural Residue of Folklore in City and Urban Blues, Chicago 1915-1950." Black Music Research Journal 12.1 (Spring, 1992): 25-41.

Spencer, Jon Michael. "Modernism and the Negro Renaissance." A Modern Mosaic: Art and Modernism in the United States. Ed.Townsend Luddington et al. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2000.

Stewart, Jacqueline. Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity. Berkeley: U of California P, 2005.

Stoppard, Tom. Arcadia. London: Faber and Faber, 1993.

Stovall, Tyler. Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996.

Stribling, T. S. Birthright. New York: Century Co., 1922.

Suisman, David. "Workers in the Kingdom of Culture: Black Swan Records and the Political Economy of African American Music." The Journal of American History 90.4 (March, 2004): 1295-1324.

Summers, Martin. Manliness and its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900-1930. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2004.

Suwondo, David. "Cane: an American Mosaic." (Yale University: April 2, 2010). Digitally archived at "African American Studies at Beinecke Library: Student Research in Beinicke Collections." 2010. Yale University. 3 Dec. 2010. <http://beineckejwj.wordpress.com/2010/06/02/student-research-suwondo/>

Symbol of the Unconquered (1920) Director and Producer: Oscar Micheaux.

Taylor, Quintard. In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990. New York: W. W. Norton, 1999.

Thirty Years Later (1928) Director and Producer: Oscar Micheaux.

Thomas, Amy M. "'There is Nothing so Effective as a Personal Canvass': Revaluaing Nineteenth-Century American Subscription Books." Book History 1 (1998): 140-55.

Thompson, Shirley E. "The Hard Work of Black Play: Chesnutt's Conjure Tales and the Counterculture of Incorporation." Leisure Studies 27.4 (2008): 411-426.

Titon, Jeff Todd. "Thematic Pattern in Downhome Blues Lyrics: The Evidence on Commercial Phonograph Records Since World War II." The Journal of American Folklore 90.357 (July-September 1977): 316-30.

Tolnay, Stewart E. The Bottom Rung: African American Family Life on Southern Farms. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1999.

Jean Toomer, Cane. New York: Liveright, 1975.

—. "Incredible Journey" notes from Chapter 1, part 2 (autobiographical writings). *Jean Toomer Papers*, Beinecke Manuscript Library, Yale University.

—. *Jean Toomer Papers*. Yale Collection of American Literature. The Beinecke Manuscript Library, Yale University.

—. Letter to Alain Locke (November 8, 1921). *Jean Toomer Papers*, Beinecke Manuscript Library, Yale University (Box 164-90, Folder 12).

—. Letter to Kenneth MacGowan, March 15, 1923. *Jean Toomer Papers*, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University (Box 5, Folder 164).

—. The Wayward and the Seeking. Ed. Darwin Turner. Washington, D.C.: Howard UP, 1980.

Trachtenberg, Alan. The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age. New York: Hill and Wang, 1982.

Tracy, Steven C. Langston Hughes and the Blues. Champaign, Illinois: U of Illinois P, 2001.

The Tuskegee Messenger (journal). Tuskegee, Alabama: Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, 1924-1936.

United States. Bureau of the Census. Fourteenth Census of Population and Housing, 1920. Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1923, 1926.

United States. Bureau of the Census. Thirteenth Census of Population and Housing, 1910. Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1913, 1915.

United States. Bureau of the Census. Negroes in the United States, 1920-1932. Charles E. Hall, ed. New York: Arno Press, 1969.

United States. Department of Agriculture. "A Decade of Negro Extension Work 1914-1924." U. S. Department of Agriculture Miscellaneous Circular 72. Washingon, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1926.

United States. Department of Agriculture. USDA Yearbook 1921: The Year In Agriculture. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1922.

United States. Bureau of Education. United States School Garden Army. Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1919.

Veiled Aristocrats (1924) Director and Producer: Oscar Micheaux.

Veiled Aristocrats (1932) Director and Producer: Oscar Micheaux.

Virgin of the Seminole (1922) Director and Producer: Oscar Micheaux.

Visher, S. S. The Geography of South Dakota. Chicago: U of Chicago Libraries, 1918.

Voigt, Ellen Bryant. The Flexible Lyric. Athens, Georgia: U of Georgia P, 1999.

Walker, Melissa "Home Extension Work among African American Farm Women in East Tennessee, 1920-1939." Agricultural History 70.3 (Summer 1996): 487-502.

Waller, Gregory A. Main Street Amusements: Movies and Commercial Entertainment in a Southern City, 1896-1930. Washington: Smithsonian Institution P, 1995.

Ware, Amy M. "Unexpected Cowboy, Unexpected Indian: The Case of Will Rogers." Ethnohistory 56.1 (2009): 1-34.

Warren, Kenneth and Henry Louis Gates Jr. "The End of African-American Literature?" Live Chat. The Chronicle of Higher Education, March 1, 2011.

Warren, Maude Radford. The Land Of The Living: A Novel. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1908.

—. Peter, Peter: A Romance Out of Town. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1909.

Washburn, Patrick S. The African American Newspaper: Voice of Freedom. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2006.

Washington, Booker T. A New Negro for a New Century. Chicago: American Publishing House, 1900.

Watson, Effie E. "Application: William E. Harmon Award for Distinguished Achievement Among Negroes in Literature." Harmon Foundation, Inc. Records, Library of Congress ("Award Program" series).

West, Cornel. Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism. New York: Penguin, 2004.

Whalan, Mark, ed. The Letters of Jean Toomer, 1919-1924. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2006.

Whyde, Janet M. "Mediating Forms: Narrating the Body in Jean Toomer's Cane. Southern Literary Journal 26.1 (Fall 1993): 44-53.

"William Pinchback Deed." Holmes County Records, Book H (April 7, 1845): 5-6. Holmes County, Mississippi. Retrieved online 7/9/11 from "Holmes County MS GenWeb": <http://msgw.org/holmes/court/williampinchbackdeed.htm>.

Williams, Raymond. The Country and the City. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1978.

—. Keywords, Revised Edition. New York: Oxford UP, 1983.

—. Marxism and Literature. New York: Oxford UP, 1977.

Williamson, Joel. The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South since Emancipation. New York: Oxford UP, 1984.

Within Our Gates (1919) Director and Producer: Oscar Micheaux.

Wolf, Eric. Europe and the People Without History. Berkeley: U of California P, 1982.

Woodson, Jon. To Make a New Race: Gurdjieff, Toomer, and the Harlem Renaissance. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1999.

Work, Monroe. Negro Year Book: An Annual Encyclopedia of the Negro, 1925-26. Tuskegee, Alabama: Negro Year Book Publishing Company, Tuskegee Institute, 1925.

Wright, Charles. Negative Blue: Selected Later Poems. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000.

Young, John K. Black Writers, White Publishers: Marketplace Politics in Twentieth-Century African American Literature. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2006.

Zelizer, Viviana A. Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994.